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ELEANOR'S VICTORY.

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M. E. BRADDON,

AUTHOR OF "LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET," "AURORA FLOYD," &c.

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IN THREE VOLUMES.

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CONTENTS.

CHAPTER I. PAGE

UNFORGOTTEN 1

CHAPTER II.

LIKE THE MEMORY OF A DREAM 21

CHAPTER III.

RECOGNITION 41

CHAPTER IV.

ON THE TRACK 52

CHAPTER V.

IN THE SHIPBROKER'S OFFICE 66

CHAPTER VI.

RESOLVED 86

CHAPTER VII.

THE ONE CHANCE 95

CHAPTER VIII.

ACCEPTED 118

CHAPTER IX.

AN INSIDIOUS DEMON 134

CHAPTER X.

SLOW FIRES 147

CHAPTER XI. PAGE

BY THE SUNDIAL 168

CHAPTER XII.

KEEPING WATCH 178

CHAPTER XIII.

AN OLD MAN'S FANCY 190

CHAPTER XIV.

A POWERFUL ALLY 204

CHAPTER XV.

THE TESTIMONY OF THE SKETCH-BOOK 217

CHAPTER XVI.

MAURICE DE CRESPIGNY'S WILL 231

CHAPTER XVII.

RICHARD'S *DISCOVERY* 245

CHAPTER XVIII.

WHAT HAPPENED AT WINDSOR 255

CHAPTER XIX.

ANOTHER RECOGNITION 266

CHAPTER XX.

LAUNCELOT'S TROUBLES 280

CHAPTER XXI.

MR. MONCKTON BRINGS GLOOMY TIDINGS FROM WOODLANDS 297

CHAPTER XXII.

LAUNCELOT'S COUNSELLOR 307

ELEANOR'S VICTORY.

CHAPTER I.

UNFORGOTTEN.

Mrs. Darrell drove her son and the two girls to Tolldale Priory in accordance with Mr. Monckton's wish. The widow had no particular desire to bring either Laura or Eleanor into contact with her uncle, Maurice de Crespigny; for she nourished that intense jealousy of all visitors who crossed the threshold of the old man's house, which is only known to expectant heirs whose chances of a fortune tremble in the wavering balance of an invalid's caprice. But Mrs. Darrell could not afford to offend Mr. Monckton. He paid a high price for her protection of his ward, and was by no means the sort of man to be thwarted with impunity.

Launcelot Darrell lolled by his mother's side, smoking a cigar and taking very little notice of the blossoming hedgerows and glimpses of luxuriant pastoral landscape. The two young ladies sat upon a low seat, with their backs to the ponies, and had therefore ample opportunity of observing the prodigal son's face.

For the first time since Mr. Darrell's return Eleanor Vane did watch that handsome face, seeking in it for some evidence of those words which Gilbert Monckton had spoken to her the day before.

"He is selfish, and shallow, and frivolous; false, I think, as well; more than this, he has a secret—a secret connected with his Indian experiences."

This is what Mr. Monckton had said. Eleanor asked herself what right he had to say so much?

It was scarcely likely that a girl of Eleanor's age, so unaccustomed to all society, so shut in from the outer world by her narrow and secluded life, could fail to be a little interested in the handsome stranger, whose advent had not been without a tinge of romance. She was interested in him, and all the more so because of that which

Gilbert Monckton had said to her. There was a secret in Launcelot Darrell's life. How strange this was! Had every creature a secret, part of themselves, hidden deep in their breasts, like that dark purpose which had grown out of the misery of her father's untimely death — some buried memory, whose influence was to overshadow all their lives?

She looked at the young man's face. It had an expression of half-defiant recklessness which seemed almost habitual to it; but it was not the face of a happy man.

Laura Mason was the only person who talked much during that drive to Tolldale. That young lady's tongue ran on in a pretty, incessant babble, about nothing in particular. The wild flowers in the hedgerows, the distant glimpses of country, the light clouds floating in the summer sky, the flaming poppies among the ripening corn, the noisy fowl upon the margin of a pond, the shaggy horses looking over farm-yard gates,—every object, animate and inanimate, between Hazlewood and Tolldale, was the subject of Miss Mason's remark. Launcelot Darrell looked at her now and then with an expression of half-admiring amusement, and sometimes aroused himself to

talk to her; but only to relapse very quickly into a half-contemptuous, half-sulky silence.

Mr. Monckton received his guests in a long low library, looking out into the neglected garden; a dusky chamber, darkened by the shadows of trailing parasites that hung over the narrow windows. But this room was an especial favourite with the grave master of the house. It was here he sat during the lonely evenings that he spent at home. The drawing-rooms on the first-floor were only used upon those rare occasions when the lawyer opened his house to his friends of long standing, dashing clients, who were very well pleased to get a week's shooting in the woody coverts about the Priory.

Neither Laura nor Eleanor felt very enthusiastic about the Raphael, which seemed to the two girls to represent an angular and rather insipid type of female beauty, but Launcelot Darrell and his host entered into an artistic discussion that lasted until luncheon was announced by the lawyer's grey-haired butler; a ponderous and dignified individual who had lived with Gilbert Monckton's father, and who was said to know more about his master's history than Gilbert's most intimate friends.

It was nearly three o'clock in the afternoon when luncheon was finished, and the party set out to attempt an invasion upon Woodlands. Launcelot Darrell gave his arm to his mother, who in a manner took possession of her son, and the two girls walked behind with the lawyer.

"You have never seen Mr. de Crespigny, I suppose, Miss Vincent?" Gilbert Monckton said, as they went out of the iron gates and struck into a narrow pathway leading through the wood.

"Never! But I am very anxious to see him."

"Why so?"

Eleanor hesitated. She was for ever being reminded of her assumed name, and the falsehood to which she had submitted out of deference to her half-sister's pride.

Fortunately the lawyer did not wait for an answer to his question.

"Maurice de Crespigny is a strange old man," he said; "a very strange old man. I sometimes think there is a disappointment in store for Launcelot Darrell; and for his maiden aunts as well."

"A disappointment!"

"Yes, I doubt very much if either the maiden

ladies or their nephews will get Maurice de Crespigny's fortune."

"But to whom will he leave it, then?"

The lawyer shrugged his shoulders.

"It is not for me to answer that question, Miss Vincent," he said. "I merely speculate upon the chances, in perfect ignorance as to facts. Were I Mr. de Crespigny's legal adviser, I should have no right to say as much as this; but as I am not, I am free to discuss the business."

Mr. Monckton and Eleanor were alone by this time, for Laura Mason had flitted on to the party in advance, and was talking to Launcelot Darrell. The lawyer's face clouded as he watched his ward and the young man.

"You remember what I said to you yesterday, Miss Vincent?" he said, after a pause.

"Perfectly."

"I am very much afraid of the influence that young man's handsome face may have upon my poor frivolous ward. I would move her out of the way of that influence if I could, but where could I remove her? Poor child! she has been shifted about enough already. She seems happy at Hazlewood; very happy, with you."

"Yes," Eleanor answered, frankly; "we love each other very dearly."

"And you would do anything to serve her?"

"Anything in the world."

Mr. Monckton sighed.

"There is one way in which you might serve her," he said, in a low voice, as if speaking to himself rather than to Eleanor, "and yet—"

He did not finish the sentence, but walked on in silence, with his eyes bent upon the ground. He only looked up now and then to listen, with an uneasy expression, to the animated conversation of Launcelot and Laura. They walked thus through the shadowy woodland, where the rustling sound of a pheasant's flight amongst the brushwood, and the gay tones of Laura's voice, only broke the silence.

Beyond the wood they came to a grassy slope dotted by groups of trees, and bounded by an invisible wire fence.

Here, on the summit of a gentle elevation, stood a low white villa—a large and important house—but built in the modern style, and very inferior to Tolldale Priory in dignity and grandeur.

This was Woodlands, the house which Maurice

de Crespigny had built for himself some thirty years before; the house whose threshold had so long been jealously guarded by the invalid's maiden nieces.

Mr. Monckton looked at his watch as he and Eleanor joined Mrs. Darrell.

"Half-past three o'clock," he said; "Mr. de Crespigny generally takes an airing in his Bath-chair at about this time in the afternoon. You see, I know the habits of the Citadel, and know therefore how to effect a surprise. If we strike across the park we are almost sure to meet him."

He led the way to a little gate in the fence. It was only fastened by a latch, and the party entered the grassy enclosure.

Eleanor Vane's heart beat violently. She was about to see her father's old and early friend; that friend whom George Vane had never been suffered to approach, to whom he had been forbidden to appeal in the hour of his distress.

"If my poor father could have written to Mr. de Crespigny for help when he lost that wretched hundred pounds, he might have been saved from a cruel death," Eleanor thought.

Fortune seemed to favour the invaders. In a shady avenue that skirted one side of the slope,

they came upon the old man and the two sisters. The maiden ladies walked on either side of their uncle's Bath-chair, erect and formidable-looking as a couple of grenadiers.

Maurice de Crespigny looked twenty years older than his spendthrift friend had looked up to the hour of his death. His bent head nodded helplessly forward. His faded eyes seemed dim and sightless. The withered hand lying idle upon the leathern apron of the Bath-chair, trembled like a leaf shaken by the autumn wind. The shadow of approaching death seemed to hover about this feeble creature, separating him from his fellow-mortals.

The two maiden ladies greeted their sister with no very demonstrative cordiality.

"Ellen!" exclaimed Miss Lavinia, the elder of the two, "this is an unexpected pleasure. I am sure that both Sarah and myself are charmed to see you; but as this is one of our poor dear invalid's worst days, your visit is rather unfortunately timed. If you had written, and given us notice of your coming—"

"You would have shut the door in my face," Mrs. Darrell said, resolutely. "Pray do not put yourself to the trouble of inventing any polite

fictions on my account, Lavinia. We understand each other perfectly. I came here by the back way, because I knew I should be refused admittance at the front door. You keep watch well, Lavinia, and I beg to compliment you upon your patience."

The widow had approached her uncle's chair, leaving the rest of the party in the background. Pale and defiant, she did battle with her two sisters, fighting sturdily in the cause of her idolised son; who seemed a great deal too listless and indifferent to look after his own interests.

The ladies in possession glared at their sister's pale face with spiteful eyes; they were a little daunted by the widow's air of resolution.

"Who are these people, Ellen Darrell?" asked the younger of the two old maids. "Do you want to kill my uncle, that you bring a crowd of strangers to intrude upon him at a time when his nerves are at their worst?"

"I have not brought a crowd of strangers. One of those people is my son, who has come to pay his respects to his uncle after his return from India."

"Launcelot Darrell returned!" exclaimed the two ladies, simultaneously.

"Yes, returned to look after his own interests; returned with very grateful feelings towards those who prompted his being sent away from his native country to waste his youth in an unhealthy climate."

"*Some* people get on in India," Miss Lavinia de Crespigny said, spitefully; "but I never thought Launcelot Darrell would do any good there."

"How kind it was in you to advise his going, then," Mrs. Darrell answered promptly. Then passing by the astonished Miss Lavinia, she went up to her uncle, and bent over him.

The old man looked up at his niece, but with no glance of recognition in his blue eyes, which had grown pale with age.

"Uncle Maurice," said Mrs. Darrell, "don't you know me?"

The invalid nodded his head.

"Yes, yes, yes!" he said; but there was a vacant smile upon his face, and it seemed as if the words were uttered mechanically.

"And are you glad to see me, dear uncle?"

"Yes, yes, yes," the old man answered in exactly the same tone.

Mrs. Darrell looked up hopelessly.

"Is he always like this?" she asked.

"No," answered Miss Sarah, briskly, "he is only so when he is intruded upon and annoyed. We told you it was one of your uncle's bad days, Ellen; and yet you are heartless enough to insist on persecuting him.

Mrs. Darrell turned upon her sister with suppressed rage.

"When will the day come in which I shall be welcome to this place, Sarah de Crespigny?" she said. "I choose my own time, and seize any chance I can of speaking to my uncle."

She looked back at the group she had left behind her, and beckoned to her son.

Launcelot Darrell came straight to his uncle's chair.

"You remember Launcelot, Uncle Maurice," Mrs. Darrell said entreatingly; "I'm sure you remember Launcelot."

The two maiden sisters watched their uncle's face with eager and jealous glances. It seemed as if the thick clouds were clearing away from the old man's memory, for a faint light kindled in his faded eyes.

"Launcelot!" he said; "yes, I remember Launcelot. In India, poor lad, in India."

"He went to India, dear uncle, and he has been away some years. You remember how unfortunate he was: the indigo planter to whom he was to have gone failed before he got to Calcutta, so that my poor boy could not even deliver the one letter of introduction which he took with him to a strange country. He was thrown upon his own resources, therefore, and had to get a living as he could. The climate never agreed with him, Uncle Maurice, and he was altogether very unhappy. He stayed in India as long as he could endure a life that was utterly unsuited to him; and then flung everything up for the sake of returning to England. You must not be angry with my poor boy, dear Uncle Maurice."

The old man seemed to have brightened up a good deal by this time. He nodded perpetually as his niece talked to him, but there was a look of intelligence in his face now.

"I am not angry with him," he said; "he was free to go; or free to return. I did the best I could for him; but of course he was free to choose his own career, and is so still. I don't expect him to defer to me."

Mrs. Darrell turned pale. This speech appeared to express a renunciation of all interest in

her son. She would almost rather that her uncle had been angry and indignant at the young man's return.

"But Launcelot wishes to please you in all he does, dear uncle," pleaded the widow. "He will be very, very sorry if he has offended you."

"He is very good," the old man answered; "he has not offended me. He is quite free, quite free to act for himself. I did the best I could for him—I did the best; but he is perfectly free."

The two maiden sisters exchanged a look of triumph. In this hand-to-hand contest for the rich man's favour, it did not seem as if either Ellen Darrell or her son were gaining any great advantage.

Launcelot bent over his great-uncle's chair.

"I am very happy to find you alive and well, sir, on my return," he said, respectfully.

The old man lifted his eyes, and looked earnestly at the handsome face bent over him.

"You are very good, nephew," he said; "I sometimes think that, because I have a little money to leave behind me, everybody wishes for my death. It's hard to fancy that every breath one draws is grudged by those who live with us. That's very hard!"

"Uncle!" cried the maiden nieces, simultaneously, with a little shriek of lady-like horror. "When have you ever fancied that?"

The old man shook his head, with a feeble smile upon his tremulous lips.

"You are very good to me, my dears," he said, "very good; but sick men have strange fancies. I sometimes think I've lived too long for myself and others. But never mind that; never mind that. Who are those people there?" he asked, in a different tone.

"Friends of mine, uncle," Mrs. Darrell answered; "and one of them is a friend of yours. You know Mr. Monckton?"

"Monckton! O, yes—yes! Monckton, the lawyer," muttered the old man; "and who is that girl yonder?" he cried suddenly, with quite an altered voice and manner, almost as if the shock of some great surprise had galvanised him into new life. "Who is that girl yonder, with fair hair and her face turned this way? Tell me who she is, Ellen Darrell?"

He pointed to Eleanor Vane as he spoke. She was standing a little way apart from Gilbert Monckton and Laura; she had taken off her broad straw hat and slung it across her arm, and

the warm summer breeze had swept the bright auburn hair from her forehead. Forgetful of every necessity for caution, in the intensity of her desire to see her dead father's dearest friend, she had advanced a few paces from her companions, and stood watching the group about the old man's chair.

"Who is she, Ellen Darrell?" repeated Mr. de Crespigny.

Mrs. Darrell looked almost frightened by her uncle's eagerness.

"That young lady is only the musical instructress of another young lady I have in my care, Uncle Maurice," she answered. "What is there in her that attracts your attention?"

The old man's eyes filled with tears that rolled slowly down his withered cheeks.

"When George Vane and I were students together at Maudlin," answered Maurice de Crespigny, "my friend was the living image of that girl."

Mrs. Darrell turned sharply round; and looked at Eleanor, as if she would have almost annihilated the girl for daring to resemble George Vane.

"I think your eyes must deceive you, my dear

uncle," said the widow; "I knew Mr. Vane well enough, and I never saw any likeness to him in this Miss Vincent."

Maurice de Crespigny shook his head.

"My eyes do not deceive me," he said. "It's my memory that's weak sometimes; my eyesight is good enough. When you knew George Vane his hair was grey, and his handsome looks faded; when I first knew him he was as young as that girl yonder, and he was like her. Poor George! poor George!"

The three sisters looked at each other. Whatever enmity might exist between Mrs. Darrell and the two maiden ladies, the three were perfectly agreed upon one point—namely, that the recollection of George Vane and his family must, at any price, be kept out of Maurice de Crespigny's mind.

The old man had not spoken of his friend for years, and the maiden sisters had triumphed in the thought that all memories of their uncle's youth had become obscured and obliterated by the gathering shadows of age. But now, at the sight of a fair-haired girl of eighteen, the old memories came back in all their force. The sudden outburst of feeling came upon the sisters

like a thunderbolt, and they lost that common instinct of self-preservation, that ordinary presence of mind, which would have prompted them to hustle the old man off, and carry him at once out of the way of this tiresome, intrusive, fair-haired young woman, who had the impertinence to resemble George Vane.

The sisters had never heard of the birth of Mr. Vane's youngest daughter. Many years had elapsed since the intercourse between Mrs. Darrell and Hortensia Bannister had extended to more than an occasional epistolary communication, and the stockbroker's widow had not thought it necessary to make any formal announcement of her half-sister's birth.

"Tell that girl to come here," cried Maurice de Crespigny, pointing with a trembling hand to Eleanor. "Let her come here; I want to look at her."

Mrs. Darrell thought it would be scarcely wise to oppose her uncle.

"Miss Vincent!" she called, sharply, to the girl; "come here, if you please, my uncle wishes to speak to you."

Eleanor Vane was startled by the widow's summons, but she came eagerly to the old man's

chair. She was very anxious to see the friend of her dead father. She went close up to the Bath-chair, and stood beside the old man.

Maurice de Crespigny laid his hand upon hers.

"Yes," he said; "yes, yes. It's almost the same face—almost the same. God bless you, my dear! It makes me fifty years younger to look at you. You are like a friend who was once very dear to me—very dear to me. God bless you!"

The girl's face grew pale with the intensity of her feeling. Oh! that her father had been alive; that she might have pleaded for him with this old man, and have reunited the broken links of the past. But of what avail now were Maurice de Crespigny's compassionate words? They could not recall the dead. They could not blot out the misery of that horrible night upon which the loss of a pitiful sum of money had driven George Vane to the commission of the fatal act which had ended his life. No! His old friend could do nothing for him; his loving daughter could do nothing for him—except to avenge his death.

Carried away by her feelings; forgetful of her assumed character; forgetful of everything except that the hand now clasped in hers was the same

that had been linked in that of her father, years and years ago, in the warm grasp of friendship; Eleanor Vane knelt down beside the old man's chair, and pressed his thin fingers to her lips.

CHAPTER II.

LIKE THE MEMORY OF A DREAM.

Mrs. Darrell drove away from Tolldale Priory late in the afternoon, and in a very despondent state of mind. She had done no good by her visit to Woodlands, and it seemed painfully probable that she had done a great deal of harm; for the unfortunate accident of a resemblance between Laura Mason's companion and the late George Vane had stirred up the memories of the past in that turbid stream, the old man's mind. The widow scarcely opened her lips during the homeward drive. She would fain have punished Eleanor for that unlucky chance by which she happened to resemble the dead man, and she did not fail to remark unpleasantly upon Miss Vane's conduct at Woodlands.

"One would really think you wished to trade upon your likeness to Mr. Vane, and to insinuate

yourself into my uncle's good graces, Miss Vincent," the widow said, rather sharply.

Eleanor blushed crimson, but did not attempt to reply to her employer's bitter speech. The falsehood of an assumed name was perpetually placing her in positions against which her truthful nature revolted.

If Mrs. Darrell had been free to dismiss Eleanor Vane, she would doubtless have done so, for the girl's presence had now become a source of alarm to her. There were two reasons for this sentiment of alarm. First, the likeness which Maurice de Crespigny had discovered between Eleanor and his dead friend, and which might prompt him at any moment to some capricious fancy for the girl; and, secondly, the fact that Eleanor's beauty and fascination might not be without their effect upon Launcelot Darrell.

The widow knew by cruel experience that her son was not a man to surrender his lightest caprice at the entreaty of another. At seven-and-twenty years of age he was as much a spoiled child as he had been at seven. Ellen Darrell looked back at the bitter trials of the past; and remembered how hard it had been to keep her son true even to his own interests. Selfish and self-willed, he had

taken his own way; always relying upon his handsome face, his shallow versatility, his showy accomplishments, to carry him through every difficulty, and get him out of every dilemma; always eager for the enjoyment of the present hour, and reckless as to any penalties to be paid in the future.

Mrs. Darrell had concentrated every feeling of her heart into one passion: her love for this young man. Frigid and reserved to all the rest of the world, with him she was impulsive, vehement, spontaneous; ready to pour out her heart's blood at his feet, if he had needed such an evidence of her devotion. For him she was jealous and exacting; harsh to others; desperate and unforgiving to those whom she thought his enemies.

For Launcelot she was anxious and ambitious. The hope that her uncle Maurice would leave his fortune to the young man, whose boyish good looks and precocious talents had made some impression upon him, many years before, never entirely deserted her. But, even if that hope should fail, her sisters were elderly women like herself. If they succeeded in cajoling Maurice de Crespigny out of his fortune, they must surely eventually leave it to their only nephew, Launce-

lot. This was how the widow reasoned. But there was another chance which she fancied she saw for her son's advancement. Laura Mason, the heiress, evidently admired the young man's handsome face and dashing manners. What more likely than that Launcelot might succeed in winning the hand and fortune of that capricious young lady?

Under these circumstances Mrs. Darrell would have been very glad to have removed Eleanor Vane out of her son's way; but this was not easily to be done. When the widow sounded Laura Mason upon the subject, and vaguely hinted at the necessity of parting with Eleanor, the heiress burst into a flood of tears, and declared passionately that she would not live without her darling Nelly. And when Mrs. Darrell went even further than this, and touched upon the subject in a conversation with Mr. Monckton, the lawyer replied very decidedly that he considered Miss Vincent's companionship of great benefit to his ward, and that he could not hear of any arrangement by which the two girls would be separated.

Mrs. Darrell, therefore, could do nothing but submit; in the hope that for once her son might consent to be governed by his interests, rather

than by those erratic impulses which had led him in the reckless and riotous days of his early youth.

She pleaded with him; entreating him to be prudent and thoughtful for the future.

"You have suffered so much from poverty, Launcelot," she urged, "that surely you will lose no opportunity of improving your position. Look back, my boy; remember that bitter time in which you were lost to me, led away by low and vicious companions, and only appealing to me when you found yourself in debt and difficulty. Think of your Indian life, and the years you have wasted,—you who are so clever and accomplished, and who ought to have been so fortunate. Oh, Launcelot, if you knew what a bitter thing it is to a mother to see her idolised child waste every opportunity of winning the advancement which should be his by right,—yes, by right, Launcelot, by the right of your talents. I never reproached you, my boy, for coming home to me penniless. Were you to return to me twenty times, as you came back that night, you would always find the same welcome, the same affection. My love for you will never change, my darling, till I go to my grave. But I suffer very bitterly when I think of

your wasted youth. You must be rich, Launcelot; you cannot afford to be poor. There are some men to whom poverty seems a spur that drives them on to greatness; but it has clogged your footsteps, and held you back from the fame you might have won."

"Egad, so it has, mother," the young man answered, bitterly; "a shabby coat paralyses a man's arm, to my mind, and it's not very easy for a fellow to hold his head very high when the nap's all worn off his hat. But I don't mean to sit down to a life of idleness, I can tell you, mother. I shall turn painter. You know I've got on with my painting pretty well during the last few years."

"I'm glad of that, my dear boy. You had plenty of time to devote to your painting, then?"

"Plenty of time; oh, yes, I was pretty well off for that matter."

"Then you were not so hard worked in India?"

"Not always. That depended upon circumstances," the young man answered, indifferently. "Yes, mother, I shall turn painter, and try and make a fortune out of my brush."

Mrs. Darrell sighed. She wished to see her

son made rich by a quicker road than the slow and toilsome pathway by which an artist reaches fortune.

"If you could make a wealthy marriage, Launcelot," she said, "you might afford to devote yourself to art, without having to endure the torturing anxieties which must be suffered by a man who has only his profession to depend upon. I wouldn't for the world wish you to sell yourself for money, for I know the wretchedness of a really mercenary marriage; but if—"

The young man flung back the dark hair from his forehead, and smiled at his mother as he interrupted her.

"If I should fall in love with this Miss Laura Mason, who, according to your account, is to have a power of money one of these days, I should prove myself a wise man. That's what you mean, isn't it, *madre mia?* Well, I'll do my best. The young lady is pretty, but her childishness is positively *impayable.* What's the amount of the fortune that is to counterbalance so much empty-headed frivolity? Eh, mother?"

"I can't quite answer that question, Launcelot. I only know that Mr. Monckton told me Laura will be very rich."

"And Gilbert Monckton, although a lawyer, is one of those uncompromising personages who never tell a lie. Well, mother, we'll see about it; I can't say anything more than that."

The young man had been standing before his easel with his palette and brushes in his hand during this conversation, now and then adding a touch here and there to a picture that he had been working at since his return. He had taken up his abode in his old apartments. His mother spent a good deal of her time with him; sitting at needlework by the open window, while he painted; listening while, in his idler moments, he sat at the piano, composing a few bars of a waltz, or trying to recall the words of some song that he had written long ago; always following him with watchful and admiring eyes, shadowed only by the mother's anxiety for her son's future.

Launcelot Darrell did not seem to be altogether a bad young man. He accepted his mother's love with something of that indolent selfishness common to those spoiled children of fortune upon whom an extra share of maternal devotion has been lavished. He absorbed the widow's affection; and gave her in return an easy-going, graceful attention, which satisfied the unselfish

woman, and demanded neither trouble nor sacrifice from the young man himself.

"Now, if the wealthy heiress were the poor companion, mother," Mr. Darrell said, presently, working away with his brush as he spoke, "your scheme would be charming. Eleanor Vincent is a glorious girl; a little bit of a spitfire, I should think, quiet and gentle as she is with us; but a splendid girl; just the sort of wife for an indolent man; a wife who would rouse him out of his lethargy and drive him on to distinction."

Yes, Launcelot Darrell, who had never in his life resisted any temptation, or accepted any guidance except that of his own wishes, was led by them now; and, instead of devoting himself to the young heiress, chose to fall desperately in love with her fair-haired companion. He fell in love with Eleanor Vane; desperately, after his own fashion. I doubt if there was any great intensity in the young man's desperation; for I do not believe that he was capable of any real depth of feeling. There was a kind of hollow, tinselly fervour in his nature which took the place of true passion. It may be that with him all emotions—love and remorse, penitence, pity, regret, hate, anger and revenge—were true and real so long as

they lasted. But all these sentiments were so short-lived, by reason of the fickleness of his mind, that it was almost difficult to believe even in their temporary truth.

But Eleanor Vane, being very young and inexperienced, had no power of analysing the character of her lover. She only knew that he was handsome, accomplished, and clever; that he loved her, and that it was very agreeable to be loved by him.

I do not believe that she returned the young man's affection. She was like a child upon the threshold of a new world: bewildered and dazzled by the glorious aspect of the unknown region before her; beguiled and delighted by its beauty and novelty. All the darker aspects of the great passion were unknown to her, and undreamed of by her. She only knew that on the cheerless horizon that had so long bounded her life, a new star had arisen—a bright and wonderful planet, which for a while displaced the lurid light that had so long shone steadfastly across the darkness.

Eleanor Vane yielded herself up to the brief holiday-time which generally comes once in almost every woman's life, however desolate and joyless the rest of that life may be. The holiday comes,—a fleeting summer of gladness and rejoicing. The

earth lights up under a new sun and moon; the flowers bloom into new colours and scatter new perfumes on the sublimated atmosphere; the waters of the commonest rivers change to melted sapphires, and blaze with the splendour of a million jewels in the sunshine. The dull universe changes to fairyland; but, alas! the holiday-time is very short: the children grow tired of paradise, or are summoned back to school; the sun and moon collapse into commonplace luminaries; the flowers fade into every-day blossoms; the river flows a grey stream under a November sky; and the dream is over.

Launcelot Darrell had been little more than a fortnight in his mother's house when he declared his love for Miss Mason's companion. The young people had been a great deal together in that fortnight; wandering in the grassy lanes about Hazlewood, and in the shadowy woods round Tolldale Priory, or on breezy hills high up above the lawyer's sheltered mansion. In hope of an alliance between Launcelot and Gilbert Monckton's ward, Mrs. Darrell was obliged to submit to the necessity which threw her son very much into the society of the companion as well as of the heiress.

"He will surely never be so foolish as to thwart my plan for his future," thought the anxious mother. "Surely, surely, he will consent to be guided by his own interests. Gilbert Monckton must know that it is only likely an attachment may arise between Launcelot and Laura. He would not leave the girl with me unless he were resigned to such an event, and ready to give his consent to their marriage. My son is poor, certainly; but the lawyer knows that he has some hope of inheriting a great fortune."

While the mother pondered thus over her son's chances of advancement, the young man took life very easily; spending his mornings at his easel, but by no means over-exerting himself; and dawdling away his afternoons in rustic rambles with the two girls.

Laura Mason was very happy in the society of this new and brilliant companion. She was bewitched and fascinated by Mr. Darrell's careless talk; which sounded very witty, very profound, sarcastic, and eloquent in the ears of an ignorant girl. She admired him and fell in love with him, and wearied poor Eleanor with her very unreserved rhapsodies about the object of her affection.

"I know it's very bold and wicked and horrid to fall in love with anybody before they fall in love with one, you know, Eleanor," the young lady said in not very elegant English; "but he is so handsome and so clever. I don't think any one in the world could help loving him.

"'I have no hope in loving thee,
I only ask to love;
I *her*-rood upon my silent heart,
As on its nest a dove;'"

added Miss Mason, quoting that favourite poet of all desponding lovers, poor L. E. L.

I think Mr. Monckton's ward rather enjoyed the hopelessness of her attachment. The brooding upon her silent heart was scarcely an accurate exposition of her conduct, as she talked reams of sentiment to Eleanor upon the subject of her unrequited affection. Miss Vane was patient and tender with her, listening to her foolish talk, and dreading the coming of that hour in which the childish young beauty must be rudely awakened from her rose-coloured dream.

"I don't want to marry him, you know, Eleanor," the young lady said; "I only want to be allowed to love him. You remember the German story in which the Knight watches the

window of his lost love's convent cell. I could live for ever and ever near him; and be content to see him sometimes; or to hear his voice, even if I did not see him. I should like to wear boy's clothes, and be his page, like Viola, and tell him my own story, you know, some day."

Eleanor remembered her promise to Gilbert Monckton, and tried sometimes to check the torrent of sentimental talk.

"I know your love is very poetical, and I dare say it's very true, my pet," she said; "but do you think Mr. Darrell is quite worth all this waste of affection? I sometimes think, Laura dear, that we commit a sin when we waste our best feelings. Suppose by-and-by you should meet some one quite as worthy of your love as Launcelot Darrell; some one who would love you very devotedly; don't you think you would look back and regret having lavished your best and freshest feelings upon a person who—"

"Who doesn't care a straw for me," cried the heiress, half crying. "That's what you mean, Eleanor Vincent. You mean to insinuate that Launcelot doesn't care for me. You are a cruel, heartless girl, and you don't love me a bit."

And the young lady bemoaned her disappointment, and wept over the hardships of her lot; very much as she might have cried for any new plaything a few years before.

It was upon a burning August morning that Launcelot Darrell declared himself to Eleanor Vane. The two girls had been sitting to him for a picture,—Eleanor as Rosalind, and Laura as Celia,—a pretty feminine group. Rosalind in her womanly robes, and not her forester's dress of grey and green; for the painter had chosen the scene in which Celia promises to share her cousin's exile.

This picture was to be exhibited in the Academy, and was to make Mr. Darrell's fortune. Laura had been called from the room to attend to some important business with a dressmaker from Windsor, and Eleanor and Launcelot were alone.

The young man went on painting for some time, and then, throwing down his brush with a gesture of impatience, went over to the window near which Eleanor sat, on a raised platform covered with a shabby drapery of red baize.

"Do you think the picture will be a success, Miss Vincent?" he asked.

"Oh yes, I think so, and hope so; but I am no judge, you know."

"Your judgment must be as good as the public judgment, I should think," Launcelot Darrell answered, rather impatiently. "The critics will try to write me down, I dare say, but I don't look to the critics to buy my picture. They'll call me crude and meretricious, and hard and cold, and thin and grey, I've no doubt; but the best picture, to my mind, is the picture that sells best, eh, Miss Vincent?"

Eleanor lifted her arched eyebrows with a look of surprise; this very low view of the question rather jarred upon her sense of the dignity of art.

"I suppose you think my sentiments very mercenary and contemptible, Miss Vincent," said the painter, interpreting the expression of her face; "but I have lived out the romance of my life; or one part of that romance, at any rate; and have no very ardent aspiration after greatness in the abstract. I want to earn money. The need of money drives men into almost every folly; further, sometimes: into follies that touch upon the verge of crime."

The young man's face darkened suddenly as he spoke. He was silent for a few moments, not

looking at his companion, but away out of the open window into vacancy, as it seemed.

The memory of Gilbert Monckton's words flashed back upon Eleanor's mind. "There is a secret in Launcelot Darrell's life," the lawyer had said; "a secret connected with his Indian experience." Was he thinking of that secret now, Eleanor wondered. But the painter's face brightened almost as suddenly as it had been overshadowed. He flung back his head with an impetuous gesture. It seemed almost as if he had cast some imaginary burden from off his shoulders by that sudden movement.

"I want to earn money, Miss Vincent," he said. "Art in the abstract is very grand, no doubt. I quite believe in the man who stabbed his model in order to get the death agony for his picture of the Crucifixion; but I must make art subservient to my own necessities. I must earn money for myself and my wife, Eleanor. I might marry a rich woman, perhaps, but I want to marry a poor one. Do you think the girl I love will listen to me, Eleanor? Do you think she will accept the doubtful future I can offer her? Do you think she will be brave enough to share the fortunes of a struggling man?"

Nothing could be more heroic than the tone in which Launcelot Darrell spoke. He had the air of a man who means to strive, with the sturdy devotion of a martyr, to win the end of his ambition, rather than that of a sanguine but vacillating young gentleman who would be ready to fling himself down under the influence of the first moment of despondency, and live upon the proceeds of the pawning of his watch, while his unfinished picture rotted upon the canvas.

He had something of George Vane's nature, perhaps; that fatally hopeful temperament common to men who are for ever going to do great things, and for ever failing to achieve even the smallest. He was one of those men who are perpetually deluding other people by the force of their power of self-delusion.

Self-deluded and mistaken now, it was scarcely strange if he deceived Eleanor Vane, who was carried away by the impetuous torrent of words in which he told her that he loved her, and that the future happiness of his life depended upon the fiat which must issue from her lips.

Only very faltering accents came from those tremulous lips. Miss Vane was not in love; she was only bewildered, and perhaps a little be-

witched, by the painter's vehemence. He was the first young, elegant, handsome, and accomplished man with whom she had ever been thrown much in contact. It is scarcely wonderful then, if this inexperienced girl of eighteen was a little influenced by the ardour of his admiration—by the eloquence of his wild talk.

She had risen from her seat in her agitation, and stood with her back to the sunlit window, trembling and blushing before her lover.

Launcelot Darrell was not slow to draw a flattering inference from these signs of womanly confusion.

"You love me, Eleanor," he said; "yes, you love me. You think, perhaps, my mother would oppose our marriage. You don't know me, dearest, if you can believe I would suffer any opposition to come between me and my love. I am ready to make any sacrifice for your sake, Eleanor. Only tell me that you love me, and I shall have a new purpose in life; a new motive for exertion."

Mr. Darrell held the girl's two hands clasped in both his own, as he pleaded thus, using hackneyed phrases with a vehement earnestness that gave new life to the old words. His face was

close to Eleanor's, with the broad light of the sunny summer sky full upon it. Some sudden fancy—some vague idea, dim and indistinct as the faint memory of a dream whose details we strive vainly to recall—flashed into the mind of George Vane's orphan daughter as she looked into her lover's black eyes. She recoiled from him a little; her eyebrows contracted into a slight frown; her blushes faded out with the effort which she made to seize upon and analyse that sudden fancy. But her effort was vain: transient as a gleam of summer lightning the thought had flashed across her brain, only to melt utterly away.

While she was still trying to recall that lost idea, while Launcelot Darrell was still pleading for an answer to his suit, the door of the painting-room was pushed open—it had been left ajar by volatile Miss Mason, most likely—and the widow entered, pale, stern, and sorrowful-looking.

CHAPTER III.

RECOGNITION.

"I THOUGHT Laura was with you," Mrs. Darrell said, rather sharply, as she scrutinised Eleanor's face with no very friendly eyes.

"She was with us until a few minutes ago," Launcelot answered, carelessly; "but she was called away to see a milliner or a dressmaker, or some such important personage in the feminine decorative art line. I don't believe that young lady's soul ever soars above laces and ribbons, and all those miscellaneous fripperies which women dignify by the generic title of their 'things'!"

Mrs. Darrell frowned at her son's contemptuous allusion to the heiress.

"Laura Mason is a very amiable and accomplished girl," she said.

The young man shrugged his shoulders, and took up his palette and brushes.

"Will you settle yourself once more in the Rosalind attitude, Miss Vincent?" he said. "I suppose our volatile Celia will be back presently."

"Will you go and look for her, Launcelot?" interposed Mrs. Darrell; "I want to speak to Miss Vincent."

Launcelot Darrell flung down his brushes and turned suddenly towards his mother with a look of angry defiance in his face.

"What have you to say to Miss Vincent that you can't say before me?" he asked. "What do you mean, mother, by breaking in upon us like this, and scowling at us as if we were a couple of conspirators?"

Mrs. Darrell drew herself to her fullest height, and looked half sternly, half contemptuously at her son. His nature, in every quality weaker and meaner than her own, prompted him to shrink from any open contest with her. Dearly as she loved this selfish, handsome scapegrace, there were times in which her better sense revolted against the weakness of her affection; and at such times Launcelot Darrell was afraid of his mother.

"I have a great deal to say to Miss Vincent,"

the widow answered, gravely. "If you refuse to leave us together, I have no doubt Miss Vincent will have the good taste to come elsewhere with me."

Eleanor looked up, startled by the suppressed passion in the widow's tone.

"I will come with you anywhere, Mrs. Darrell," she said, "if you wish to speak to me."

"Come this way, then."

Mrs. Darrell swept out of the room, and Eleanor followed her, before the young man had any opportunity for remonstrance. The widow led the way to the pretty chamber in which Miss Vane slept, and the two women went in together, Mrs. Darrell shutting the door behind her.

"Miss Vincent," she said, taking Eleanor's hand in her own, "I am going to appeal to you more frankly than one woman often appeals to another. I might diplomatise and plot against you, but I am not base enough for that; though, I dare say, I could stoop to a good deal that is despicable for the sake of my son. And, again, I have so good an opinion of you that I think candour will be the wiser policy. My son has asked you to be his wife."

"Madam," stammered Eleanor, looking aghast at the pale face, which had an almost tragic aspect in its earnestness.

"Yes, I told you just now that I could do despicable things for my son's sake. I was passing the door while Launcelot was talking to you. The door was ajar, you know. I heard a few words; enough to tell me the subject upon which he was speaking; and I stopped to hear more. I listened, Miss Vincent. It was very contemptible, was it not?"

Eleanor was silent. She stood before the widow looking down upon the ground. The colour came and went in her face; she was agitated and confused by what had happened; but in all her agitation and confusion the memory of that sudden fancy that had flashed across her brain while Launcelot Darrell talked to her was uppermost in her mind.

"You despise me for my conduct, Miss Vincent," said Mrs. Darrell, reading the meaning of the girl's silence; "but the day may come in which you may experience a mother's anguish; the brooding care, the unceasing watchfulness, the feverish, all-devouring anxiety which only a mother can feel. If that day ever comes, you

will be able to forgive me; to think mercifully of me. I do not complain of my son; I never have complained of him. But I suffer; I suffer. I see him holding no place in the world, despised by prosperous and successful men, with a wasted youth behind him and a blank future before. I love him; but I am not deceived in him. The day for all deception is past. He will never be rich or prosperous by any act of his own. There are but two chances for him: the chance of inheriting my uncle's fortune, or the chance of marrying a rich woman. I speak very frankly, you see, Miss Vincent, and I expect equal candour from you. Do you love my son?"

"Madam—Mrs. Darrell—I—"

"You would not answer him just now; I ask you to answer me. The prosperity of his future life hangs upon your reply. I know that he *might* marry a girl who does love him; and who can bring him a fortune which will place him in the position he ought to occupy. Be generous, Miss Vincent. I ask you to tell me the truth. That is the least you can do. Do you love my son, Launcelot Darrell? Do you love him with your whole heart and soul, as I love him?"

Eleanor lifted her head suddenly, and looked full in the widow's face.

"No, madam," she answered, proudly, "I do not."

"Thank God for that! Even if you had loved him, I would not have shrunk from asking you to sacrifice yourself for his happiness. As it is, I appeal to you without hesitation. Will you leave this place; will you leave me my son, with the chance of planning his future after my own fashion?"

"I will, Mrs. Darrell," Eleanor said, earnestly. "I thought, perhaps, till to day—I may have fancied that I—I mean that I was flattered by your son's attention, and perhaps believed I loved him a little," the girl murmured shyly; "but I know now that I have been mistaken. Perhaps it is the truth and intensity of your love that shows me the shallowness and falsehood of my own. I remember how I loved my father,"—her eyes filled with tears as she spoke,—"and, looking back at my feelings for him, I know that I do not love Mr. Darrell. It will be much better for me to go away. I shall be sorry to leave Laura; sorry to leave Hazlewood, for I have been very happy here—too happy, perhaps.

I will write to your son, and tell him that I leave this place of my own free will."

"Thank you, my dear," the widow said, warmly; "my son would be very hard with me if he thought that my influence had been the means of thwarting any whim of his. I know him well enough to know that this sentiment, like every other sentiment of his, will not endure for ever. He will be angry and offended, and wounded by your departure; but he will not break his heart, Miss Vincent."

"Let me go away at once, Mrs. Darrell," said Eleanor; "it will be better for me to go at once. I can return to my friends in London. I have saved some money while I have been with you, and I shall not go back to them penniless."

"You are a generous and noble-hearted girl. It shall be my care to provide you with at least as good a home as you have had here. I am not selfish enough to forget how much I have asked of you."

"And you will let me go at once. I would rather not see Laura, or say good-bye to her. We have grown so fond of each other. I never had a sister—at least never an affectionate sister

—and Laura has been like one to me. Let me go away quietly without seeing her, Mrs. Darrell. I can write to her from London to say good-bye."

"You shall do just as you like, my dear," the widow answered. "I will drive you over to Windsor in time for the four o'clock train, and you will get into town before dark. I must go now and see what my son is doing. If he should suspect—"

"He shall suspect nothing till I am gone," said Eleanor. "It is past one o'clock now, Mrs. Darrell, and I must pack all my things. Will you keep Laura out of my room, please, for if she came here, she'd guess—"

"Yes, yes, I'll go and see—I'll make all arrangements."

Mrs. Darrell hurried out of the room, leaving Eleanor to contemplate the sudden change in her position. The girl dragged one of her trunks out of a recess in the simply-furnished bedchamber, and, sitting down upon it in a half-despondent attitude, reflected on the unlooked for break in her existence. Once more she was called upon to disunite herself from the past, and begin life anew.

"Am I never to know any rest?" she thought. "I had grown so accustomed to this place. I shall be glad to see the Signora and Richard once more; but Laura, Mr. Monckton, —I wonder whether they will be sorry to lose me."

By three o'clock in the afternoon, all Eleanor's preparations were completed. Her trunks packed, and handed over to the factotum of the Hazlewood establishment, who was to see them safely despatched by luggage train after the young lady's departure. At three o'clock precisely Miss Vincent took her seat beside Mrs. Darrell in the low basket carriage.

Circumstances had conspired to favour the girl's unnoticed departure from Hazlewood. Laura Mason had been prostrated by the intense strain upon her faculties caused by an hour's interview with her dressmaker; and had flung herself upon the sofa in the drawing-room, after sopping up half a pint of eau-de-Cologne on her flimsy handkerchief. Worn out by her exertions, and lulled by the summer heat, the young lady had fallen into a heavy slumber of two or three hours' duration.

Launcelot Darrell had left the house almost immediately after the scene in the painting-room, striding out of the hall without leaving any intimation as to the direction in which he was going, or the probable hour of his return.

Thus it was that the little pony-carriage drove quietly away from the gates of Hazlewood; and Eleanor left the house in which she had lived for upwards of a year, without any one caring to question her as to the cause of her departure.

Very few words were said by either Mrs. Darrell or her companion during the drive to Windsor. Eleanor was absorbed in gloomy thought. She did not feel any intense grief at leaving Hazlewood; but some sense of desolation, some despondency at the thought that she was a wanderer on the face of the earth, with no real claim upon any one, no actual right to rest anywhere. They drove into Windsor while she was thinking thus. They had come through the park, and they entered the town by the gateway at the bottom of the hill. They had driven up the hill and were in the principal street below the castle wall, when Mrs. Darrell uttered an exclamation of surprise.

"Launcelot!" she said, "and we must pass

him to get to the station. There's no help for it."

Eleánor looked up. Yes, before the door of one of the principal hotels stood Mr. Launcelot Darrell, with two other young men. One of these men was talking to him, but he was paying very little attention. He stood upon the edge of the curbstone, with his back half turned to his companion, kicking the pebbles on the road with the toe of his boot, and staring moodily before him.

In that one moment,—in the moment in which the pony-carriage, going at full speed, passed the young man,—the thought which had flashed, so vague and indistinct, so transient and intangible, through the mind of Eleanor Vane that morning, took a new shape, and arose papable and vivid in her brain.

This man, Launcelot Darrell, was the sulky stranger, who had stood on the Parisian Boulevard, kicking the straws upon the curbstone, and waiting to entrap her father to his ruin.

CHAPTER IV.

ON THE TRACK.

THE little pony-carriage drove on to the station; and Eleanor, like some traveller in a dream, saw the castle walls and turrets, the busy street and hurrying people, spin past her eyes, and melt into confusion. She did not know how she entered the railway station, or how she came to be walking quietly up and down the platform with Mrs. Darrell. There was a choking sensation in her dry throat, a blinding mist before her eyes, and a confusion that was almost terrible to bear in her brain. She wanted to get away; anywhere, so long as it was away from all the world. In the meantime, she walked up and down the platform, with Launcelot Darrell's mother by her side.

"I am mad," she thought. "I am mad. It *cannot* be so!"

Again and again in the course of Eleanor

Vane's brief association with the widow's son, something, some fancy, some shadowy recollection, vague and impalpable as the faintest clouds in the summer sky above Hazlewood, had flitted across her mind; only to be blotted away before she could even try to define or understand it. But now these passing fancies all culminated in one conviction; Launcelot Darrell was the man whom she had seen lounging on the curbstone of the Boulevard on the night of her last parting with her father.

In vain she reasoned with herself that she had no justifiable grounds for this conviction—the conviction remained, nevertheless. The only foundation for her belief that Launcelot Darrell, from amongst all other men, was the one man whom she sought to pursue, was a resemblance in his attitude as he stood lounging in the Windsor street, to the attitude of the young man on the Boulevard. Surely this was the slightest, the weakest foundation on which belief ever rested. Eleanor Vane could acknowledge this; but she could not lessen the force of that belief. At the very moment when the memory of her father, and her father's death, had been furthest from her thoughts, this sudden con-

viction, rapid and forcible as inspiration, had flashed upon her.

The matter was beyond reason, beyond argument.

The young man loitering listlessly upon the curbstone of the Windsor street, was the man who had loitered on the Boulevard; waiting, sulkily enough, while his companion tempted George Vane to his destruction.

It seemed as if the girl's memory, suddenly endowed with a new and subtle power, took her back to that August night in the year '53, and placed her once more face to face with her father's enemy. Once more the dark, restless eyes, the pale, cowering face, and moustachioed lip, overshadowed by the slouched hat, flashed upon her for a moment, before the sulky stranger turned away to keep moody silence throughout his companion's babble. And with that memory of the past, was interlinked the face and figure of Launcelot Darrell; so closely, that do what she would, Eleanor Vane could not dissociate the two images.

And she had suffered this man, of all other men, to tell her that he loved her; she had taken a romantic pleasure in his devotion; day after

day, and hour after hour, she had been his companion; sharing his enjoyments, sympathising with his pursuits, admiring and believing him. This day—this very day—he had held her hand, he had looked in her face; and the words she had spoken to Richard Thornton had proved only a vain boast after all. No instinct in her own breast had revealed to her the presence of her father's murderer.

Mrs. Darrell looked furtively every now and then at the girl's face. The iron rigidity of that white face almost startled the widow. Was it the expression of terrible grief restrained by a superhuman effort of will?

"Does this girl love my son, I wonder?" the widow thought; and then the answer, prompted by a mother's pride, came quickly after the question. "Yes, how could she do otherwise than love him? How could any woman on earth be indifferent to my boy?"

Something, almost akin to pity, stirred faintly in the heart which was so cold to every creature upon earth, except this spoiled and prodigal son; and Mrs. Darrell did her best to comfort the banished girl.

"I am afraid you are ill, my dear Miss Vin-

cent," the widow said. "The excitement of this sudden departure has been too much for you. Pray, my dear, do not think that I submit to this necessity without very great regret. You have given me perfect satisfaction in everything you have done, ever since you entered my house. No praises I can bestow upon you in recommending you to a new home will go beyond the truth. Forgive me! Forgive me, my poor child; I know I must seem very cruel; but I love my son so dearly—I love him so dearly."

There was real feeling in the tone in which these words were spoken; but the widow's voice sounded far away to Eleanor Vane, and the words had no meaning. The girl turned her stony face towards the speaker, and made a feeble effort to understand what was said to her; but all power of comprehension seemed lost in the confusion of her brain.

"I want to get back to London," she said. "I want to get away from this place. Will it be long before the train starts, Mrs. Darrell?"

"Not five minutes. I have put up your money in this envelope, my dear, a quarter's salary; the quarter began in June, you know, and I have paid you up to September. I have paid for your

ticket, also, in order that your money might not be broken into by that expense. Your luggage will be sent to you to-morrow. You will get a cab at the station, my dear. Your friends will be very much surprised to see you, no doubt."

"My friends!" repeated Eleanor, in an absent tone.

"Yes, the good music-mistress and her son. I have your address, Miss Vincent, and you may rely on hearing from me in a few days. I shall take care that you suffer no inconvenience from this sudden change in all our plans. Good-by, and God bless you, my dear!

Eleanor had taken her seat in the carriage by this time, and the train was about to move. Mrs. Darrell held out her hand; but the girl drew away from her with a sudden movement of terror. "Oh, please do not shake hands with me!" she cried. "I am very, very unhappy."

The train moved away before the widow could reply to this strange speech; and the last thing that Eleanor saw, was the pale face of Launcelot Darrell's mother turned towards her with a look of surprise.

"Poor child," thought Mrs. Darrell, as she walked slowly back to the station door, before

which her pony-carriage waited. "She feels this very much, but she has acted nobly."

The widow sighed as she remembered that the worst part of the struggle was yet to come. She would have her son's indignation to encounter and to endure; not the stormy passion of a strong man, unfairly separated from the woman he loves; but the fretful irritation of a spoiled child who has been robbed of a favourite toy.

It was nearly dark when Eleanor Vane reached the Pilasters. She paid and dismissed the cab in Dudley Street, and made her way on foot under the familiar archway, and into the Colonnade, where the same children seemed to be playing the same games in the dusky light, the same horses peering from the stable doors, the same cabmen drinking at the old-fashioned public-house at the corner.

The Signora was giving a singing-lesson to a stolid young person with a fat face and freckles, who was being prepared for the lyric drama, and wished to appear at one of the opera houses as Norma, after a dozen lessons or so. Eliza Picirillo was trying her hardest to simplify a difficult passage for this embyro Grisi's com-

prehension, when Eleanor Vane opened the door of the little sitting-room, and appeared upon the threshold.

It would have been natural to the girl to have rushed to the piano and flung herself into the arms of the Signora at the risk of upsetting the stolid pupil; and there was something so very *un*natural in her manner as she paused in the open doorway,—something so wan and ghost-like in her appearance, that Eliza Picirillo rose from her music-stool in alarm; and stared aghast at this unexpected visitor.

"Eleanor!" she exclaimed, "Eleanor!"

"Yes, dear Signora, it is I! I—I know I have come back very unexpectedly; I have a great deal to tell you by-and-by. But I am tired to death. May I sit down, please, while you finish your lesson?"

"*May* you sit down! My darling Nelly, is that the way you talk in your old home. My dear, dear child, do you think you can ever come so unexpectedly as to fail to find a welcome from Eliza Picirillo. Here, my dear; sit down and make yourself as comfortable as you can until I'm able to attend to you. Excuse me, Miss Dodson, we'll go on with the duet directly."

The music-mistress wheeled forward an old easy-chair, her own favourite seat, and Eleanor dropped wearily into it. Signora Picirillo removed the girl's bonnet, and tenderly smoothed her tumbled hair; murmuring expressions of welcome and affection, and whispering a promise that the lesson should be very soon finished.

She went back to Norma after seeing Eleanor comfortably ensconced in the arm-chair, and hammered away sturdily and conscientiously at the "*Deh, Conte*" duet; in which Miss Dodson gave a very mild interpretation of the Italian composer's meaning, and sang about Pollio, her children, and her wrongs as placidly as if she had been declaiming her wish to be a butterfly, or a daisy, or any other sentiment common to English ballad-singers.

But when Miss Dodson had finished singing, and had put on her bonnet and shawl, which operation occupied a good deal of unnecessary time, and had rolled up her music, and found her gloves, which had fallen off the piano and hidden themselves in an obscure and dusty corner of the room, and had further entered into a detailed and intricate explanation of her engagements and domestic circumstances, before making

an appointment for the next lesson, and had been finally hustled out of the room and lighted down the stairs, and fully instructed as to the nearest way from the Pilasters to Camden Town, Eliza Picirillo was able to give her full attention to the pale-faced girl who had returned so suddenly to her old shelter. The music-mistress was almost frightened at the expression of Eleanor Vane's face. She remembered only too well having seen that look before, upon the September night in Paris; when the girl of fifteen had sworn to be revenged upon her father's enemies.

"Nelly, my darling," she said, seating herself beside Eleanor's chair, "how is it that you come home so suddenly? Nothing could be greater happiness than to have you back, my dear. But I know that something has happened; I can see it in your face, Nelly. Tell me, my love, what is it?"

"It is nothing to be sorry about, dear Signora; I have come away because—because Mrs. Darrell wished it. Her son—her only son has come home from India, and she wants him to marry a rich woman, and—and—"

"And he has fallen in love with *you*, eh, Nelly?" asked the Signora. "Well, I'm not

surprised to hear that, my dear; and you are honourable enough to beat a retreat, and leave the young man free to make a mercenary marriage at his mother's bidding. Dear, dear, what strange things people are ready to do for money now-a-days. I'm sure you've acted very wisely, my darling; so cheer up, and let me see the bright smile that we've been accustomed to. There's nothing in all this to make you look so pale, Nelly."

"Do I look pale?"

"Yes, as pale as a ghost weary with a long night's wandering. Nelly, dear," said the Signora, very gently, "you weren't in love with this young man; you didn't return his affection, did you?"

"In love with him!" cried Eleanor Vane, with a shudder, "oh! no, no."

"And yet you seem sorry at having left Hazlewood."

"I am sorry—I—I had many reasons for wishing to stay there."

"You were attached to your companion, Miss Mason?"

"Yes, I was very much attached to her," answered Eleanor; "don't ask me any more questions to-night, dear Signora. I'm tired out

with my journey and the excitement of—all-that has happened to-day. I will explain things more fully to-morrow; I am glad to come back to you—very, very glad to see you once more, dearest friend; but I had a strong reason for wishing to stay at Hazlewood,—I have a powerful motive for wanting to go back there, if I could go back—which I fear I never can." The girl stopped abruptly, as if absorbed in her own thoughts, and almost unconscious of her friend's presence.

"Well, well, Nelly, I won't question you any further," Eliza Picirillo said, soothingly. "Goodness knows, my dear, I am glad enough to have you with me, without worrying you about the why and the wherefore. But I must go and try and get your little room ready again for you, or perhaps, as it's late, you'd better sleep with me to-night."

"If you please, dear Signora."

The music-mistress hurried away to make some preparations in the bed-chamber adjoining the little sitting-room; and Eleanor Vane sat staring at the guttering tallow candles on the table before her, lost in the tumult and confusion of thoughts which as yet took no distinct form in her brain.

At the very moment in which she had set a barrier between herself and Hazlewood, that might prevent her ever crossing the threshold of its gates, she had made a discovery which rendered that retired country dwelling-house the one spot upon earth to which she had need to have free access.

"I fancied that I was going away from my revenge when I left London to go into Berkshire," she thought, "now I leave my revenge behind me at Hazlewood. And yet how can it be as I think? How can it be so? Launcelot Darrell went to India a year before my father died. Can it be only a likeness after all—an accidental likeness between *that man* and Mrs. Darrell's son?"

She sat thinking of these things—reasoning with herself upon the utter improbability of the identity of the two men, yet yielding again and again to that conviction which had forced itself upon her, sudden and irresistible, in the Windsor street,—while the Signora bustled about between the two rooms, stopping to cast a stolen glance now and then at Eleanor Vane's thoughtful face.

Mr. Richard Thornton came in by-and-by. The Phœnix was closed as to dramatic perform-

ances, but the scene-painter's work never stopped. The young man gave utterance to a cry of delight as he saw the figure sitting in his aunt's easy-chair.

"Nell!" he exclaimed, "has the world come to an end, and have you dropped into your proper position in the general smash! Eleanor! how glad I am to see you."

He held out both his hands. Miss Vane rose and mechanically put her white fingers in the weather-beaten looking palms held out to receive them.

In that moment the scene-painter saw that something had happened.

"What's the matter, Nell?" he cried eagerly.

"Hush, Dick," said the girl, in a whisper. "I don't want the Signora to know."

"You don't want the Signora to know what?"

"I have found that man."

"What man?"

"The man who caused my father's death."

CHAPTER V.

IN THE SHIPBROKER'S OFFICE.

ELEANOR VANE employed the morning after her arrival at the Pilasters in writing to Laura Mason. She would have written a long letter if she could, for she knew what grief her sudden departure must have caused her childish and confiding companion; but she could not write of anything except the one thought that absorbed her whole brain, leaving her for the common business of life a purposeless and powerless creature. The explanation which she gave of her sudden departure was lame and laboured; her expressions of regard were trite and meaningless. It was only when she came to that subject which was the real purpose of her letter; it was only when she came to write of Launcelot Darrell, that there was any vigour or reality in her words.

"I have a favour to ask you, dear Laura," she

wrote, "and I must beg you to use your best discretion in granting it. I want you to find out for me the date of Mr. Darrell's departure for Calcutta, and the name of the vessel in which he sailed. Do this, Laura, and you will be serving me; perhaps serving him also."

"If I find that he really was in India at the date of my father's death," Eleanor thought, "I *must* cease to suspect him."

Later in the day, Miss Vane went out with Richard into the streets and squares in which all their secret conferences had taken place. She told the scene-painter very simply and briefly of what had happened, and poor Dick listened to her story with a tender respect, as he would have listened to anything from her. But he shook his head with a sad smile when she had finished.

"What do you think now, Richard?" she asked.

"I think that you are the dupe of a foolish fancy, Nelly," the young man answered. "You are deceived by some chance resemblance between this Mr. Darrell and the man you saw upon the Boulevard. Any dark pale-faced man lounging moodily on a curbstone would have reminded

you of the figure which is so interwoven with the memories of that mournful time in Paris. Forget it, Nelly, my dear; forget that dark chapter in the history of your girlhood. Your father's rest will be none the sweeter because the brightness of your youth is blighted by these bitter memories. Do your duty, Eleanor, in the state to which you are called. You are *not* called upon to sacrifice the fairest years of your life to a Quixotic scheme of vengeance."

"Quixotic!" cried Eleanor, reproachfully; "you would not speak like this, Richard, if *your* father had suffered as my father suffered through the villany of a gambler and cheat. It is no use talking to me, Dick," she added, resolutely. "If this conviction, which I cannot get out of my mind, is a false one, its falsehood must be proved. If it is true—Why then it will seem to me as if Providence had flung this man across my pathway; and that I am appointed to bring punishment upon him for his wickedness."

"Perhaps, Eleanor; but this Mr. Darrell is *not* the man."

"How do you know he is not?"

"Because, according to your own account, Launcelot was in India in the year '53."

"Yes, they *say* that he was there."

"Have you any reason to doubt the fact?" asked Richard.

"Yes," answered Eleanor, "when Mr. Darrell first returned to Hazlewood, Laura Mason was very anxious to hear all about what she called his 'adventures' in India. She asked him a great many questions, and I remember—I cannot tell you, Dick, how carelessly I listened at the time, though every word comes back to me now as vividly as if I had been a prisoner on trial for my life, listening breathlessly to the evidence of the witnesses against me—I remember now how obstinately Launcelot Darrell avoided all Laura's questions, telling her at last, almost rudely, to change the subject. The next day Mr. Monckton came to us, and he talked about India, and Mr. Darrell again avoided the question in the same sullen, disagreeable manner. You may think me weak and foolish, Richard, and I dare say I am so; but Mr. Monckton is a very clever man. *He* could not be easily deceived."

"But what of him?"

"He said, 'Launcelot Darrell has a secret; and that secret is connected with his Indian

experiences.' I thought very little of this at the time, Dick; but I think I understand it now."

"Indeed, and the young man's secret—?"

"Is that he never went to India."

"Eleanor!"

"Yes, Richard, I think and believe this; and you must help me to find out whether I am right or wrong."

The scene-painter sighed. He had hoped that his beautiful adopted sister had long since abandoned or forgotten her Utopian scheme of vengeance, in the congenial society of a gay-hearted girl of her own age. And, behold, here she was, vindictive, resolute, as upon that Sunday evening, a year and a half ago, on which they had walked together in those dingy London streets.

Eleanor Vane interpreted her companion's sigh.

"Remember your promise, Richard," she said. "You promised to serve me, and you must do so—you *will* do so, won't you, Dick?"

The avenging fury had transformed herself into a siren as she spoke, and looked archly up at her companion's face, with her head on one side, and a soft light in her grey eyes.

"You won't refuse to serve me, will you, Richard?"

"Refuse!" cried the young man. "Oh, Nelly, Nelly, you know very well there is nothing in the world I could refuse you."

Miss Vane accepted this assurance with great composure. She had never been able to dissociate Richard Thornton with those early days in which she had accompanied him to Covent Garden to buy mulberry leaves for his silkworms, and had learned to play "God save the Queen" upon the young musician's violin. Nothing was further from her thoughts than the idea that poor Dick's feelings could have undergone any change since those childish days in the King's Road, Chelsea.

The letter which Eleanor so feverishly awaited from Laura Mason came by return of post. The young lady's epistle was very long, and rather rambling in its nature. Three sheets of notepaper were covered with Miss Mason's lamentations for her Eleanor's absence, reproachful complainings against her cruelty, and repeated entreaties that she would come back to Hazlewood.

George Vane's daughter did not linger over

this feminine missive. A few days ago she would have been touched by Laura's innocent expressions of regard; now her eyes hurried along the lines, taking little note of all those simple words of affection and regret, and looking greedily forward to that one only passage in the letter which was likely to have any interest for her.

This passage did not occur until Eleanor had reached the very last of the twelve pages which Miss Mason had covered with flowing Italian characters, whose symmetry was here and there disfigured by sundry blots and erasures. But as her eyes rested upon the last page, Eleanor Vane's hand tightened upon the paper in her grasp, and the hot blood rushed redly to her earnest face.

"And I have found out all you want to know, dear Nell," wrote Miss Mason, "though I am puzzled out of my wits to know why you should want to know it—when I did exercises in composition at Bayswater, they wouldn't let me put two 'knows' so near together; but you won't mind it, will you, dear? Well, darling, I'm not very clever at beating about the bush or finding out anything in a diplomatic way; so

this afternoon at tea—I am writing to catch the evening post, and Bob is going to take my letters to the village for sixpence—I asked Launcelot Darrell, who was not drinking his tea, like a Christian, but lolling in the window, smoking a cigar: he has been as sulky as a bear ever since you left—oh, Nelly, Nelly, he isn't in love with you, is he?—I should break my heart if I thought he was—I asked him, point blank, what year and what day he sailed for India. I suppose the question sounded rather impertinent, for he coloured up scarlet all in a minute, and shrugged his shoulders in that dear disdainful way of his that always reminds me of Lara or the Corsair—L. and the C. were the same person, though, weren't they—and said, 'I don't keep a diary, Miss Mason, or I should be happy to afford you any information you may require as to my antecedents.' I thought I should have dropped through the floor, Nelly, —the floor won't let one drop through it, or else I am sure I should,—and I couldn't have asked another question, even for your sake, dear; when, strange to say, Mrs. Darrell got me quite out of the difficulty. 'I am sorry you should answer Laura so very unkindly, Launcelot,' she

said; 'there is nothing strange in her question. *I* remember the date of your departure from your native country only too vividly. You left this house upon the 3rd of October, '52, and you were to sail from Gravesend on the 4th, in the Princess Alice. I have reason to remember the date, for it seemed as if my uncle chose the very worst season of the year for sending you upon a long sea voyage. But he was prompted, no doubt, by my sisters. I ought to feel no anger against *him*, poor old man.'"

Eleanor Vane glanced hurriedly at the concluding words of the letter. Then, with the last sheet crumpled in her hand, she sat motionless and absorbed, thinking over its contents.

"If Launcelot Darrell sailed for India upon the 4th of October, '52, he is not likely to have been in Paris, in '53. If I can only prove to myself that he did sail upon that date, I will try and believe that I have been deluded by some foolish fancy of my own. But why did his face flush scarlet when Laura questioned him about his voyage—why did he pretend to have forgotten the date?"

Eleanor waited impatiently for the arrival of her friend and counsellor, Richard Thornton.

He came in at about three o'clock in the afternoon, while his aunt was still absent amongst her out-of-door pupils, and flung himself, jaded and worn out, on the chintz-covered sofa. But tired as he was, he aroused himself by an effort to listen to that portion of Laura Mason's letter which related to Launcelot Darrell.

"What do you think now, Dick?" Miss Vane asked, when she had finished reading.

"Pretty much what I thought before, Nell," answered Mr. Thornton; "this young fellow's objection to talk of his Indian voyage is no proof that he never went upon that voyage. He may have half-a-dozen unpleasant recollections connected with that part of his life. I don't particularly care about talking of the Phœnix; but I never committed a murder in the obscurity of the flies, or buried the body of my victim between the stage and the mezzanine floor. People have their secrets, Nell, and we have no right to pry into the small mysteries which may lurk under a change of countenance or an impatient word."

Eleanor Vane took very little notice of the young man's argument.

"Can you find out if Launcelot Darrell sailed in the Princess Alice, Dick?" she added.

The scene-painter rubbed his chin reflectively.

"I can *try* and find out, my dear," he said, after a pause; "that's open to anybody. The Princess Alice! She's one of Ward's ships, I think. If the shipbrokers are inclined to be civil, they'll perhaps help me; but I have no justification for bothering them upon the subject, and they *may* tell me to go about my business. If I could give them a good reason for my making such an inquiry, I might very likely find them willing to help me. But what can I tell them; except that a very beautiful young person with grey eyes and auburn hair has taken an absurd crotchet into her obstinate head; and that I, her faithful slave, am compelled to do her bidding?"

"Never mind what they say to you, Richard," Miss Vane replied, authoritatively; "they *must* answer your question, if you only go on asking them long enough."

Mr. Thornton smiled.

"That's the true feminine method of obtaining information, isn't it, Nell?" he said; "however, I'll do my best, and if the shipbrokers are to be 'got at,' as sporting gentlemen say, it shall go hard

if I don't get a list of the passengers who sailed in the Princess Alice."

"Dear, dear Dick!" cried Eleanor, holding out both her hands to her champion. The young man sighed. Alas, he knew only too well that all this pretty friendliness was as far away from any latent tenderness or hidden emotion as the blusterous frozen North from the splendid sunny South.

"I wonder whether she knows what love is," thought the scene-painter; "I wonder whether her heart has been touched ever so slightly by the fatal emotion. No; she is a bright virginal creature, all confidence and candour, and she has yet to learn the mysteries of life. I wish I could think less of her, and fall in love with Miss Montalembert—her name is plain Lambert, and she has added the Monta for the sake of euphony. I wish I could fall in love with Lizzie Lambert, popularly known as Elise Montalembert, the soubrette at the Phœnix. She is a good little girl, and earns a salary of four pounds a week. She's fond of the Signora, too, and we could leave the Pilasters and go into housekeeping upon our joint salaries."

Mr. Thornton's fancies might have rambled on

in this wise for some time, but he was abruptly aroused from his reverie by Eleanor Vane, who had been watching him rather impatiently.

"When are you going to the shipbroker's, Dick?" she asked.

"When am I going?"

"Yes, you'll go at once, won't you?"

"Eh! Well, my dear Nell, Cornhill's a good step from here."

"But you can take a cab," cried the young lady. "I've plenty of money, Dick, and do you think I shall grudge it for such a purpose? Go at once, Richard, dear, and take a cab."

She pulled a purse from her pocket, and tried to force it into the young man's hand, but he shook his head.

"I'm afraid the shipbroker's office would be closed, Nelly," he said. "We'd better wait till to-morrow morning."

But the young lady would not hear of this. She was sure the shipbroker's office wouldn't close so early, she said, with as much authority as if she had been intimately acquainted with the habits of shipbrokers; and she bustled Dick down stairs and out of the house before he well knew where he was.

He returned in about an hour and a half; very tired and dusty; having preferred his independence and an omnibus to the cab offered by Eleanor.

"It's no use, Nelly," he said despondently, as he threw off his hat, and ran his dirty fingers through the rumpled shock of dusty brown hair that had been blown about his face by the hot August wind, "the office was just closing, and I couldn't get anything out of the clerks. I was never so cruelly snubbed in my life."

Miss Vane looked very much disappointed, and was silent for a minute or so. Then her face suddenly brightened, and she patted Richard's shoulder with a gesture expressive of patronage and encouragement.

"Never mind, Dick," she said smilingly, "you shall go again to-morrow morning early; and I'll go with you. We'll see if these shipbroker's clerks will snub *me*."

"Snub you!" cried Richard Thornton, in a rapture of admiration. "I think that, of all the members of the human family, paid officials are the most unpleasant and repulsive; but I don't think there's a clerk in Christendom who could snub you, Miss Vane."

Eleanor smiled. Perhaps for the first time in her life the young lady was guilty of a spice of that feminine sin called coquetry. Her boxes had arrived from Hazlewood upon the previous evening. She was armed therefore with all those munitions of war without which a woman can scarcely commence a siege upon the fortress of man's indifference.

She rose early the next morning—for she was too much absorbed in the one great purpose of her life to be able to sleep very long or very soundly—and arrayed herself for a visit to the shipbroker.

She put on a bonnet of pale blue crape, which was to be the chief instrument in the siege—a feminine battering ram or Armstrong gun before which the stoutest wall must have crumbled—and smoothed her silken locks, her soft amber-dropping tresses, under this framework of diaphanous azure. Then she went into the little sitting-room where Mr. Richard Thornton was loitering over his breakfast, to try the effect of this piece of milliner's artillery upon the unhappy young man.

"Will the clerks snub me, Dick?" she asked archly.

The scene-painter replied with his mouth full of egg and bread-and-butter, and was more enthusiastic than intelligible.

A four-wheel cab jolted Miss Vane and her companion to Cornhill, and the young lady contrived to make her way into the sanctum sanctorum of the shipbroker himself, in a manner which took Richard Thornton's breath away from him, in the fervour of his admiration. Every barrier gave way before the blue bonnet and glistening auburn hair, the bright grey eyes and friendly smile. Poor Dick had approached the officials with that air of suppressed enmity and lurking hate with which the Englishman generally addresses his brother Englishman; but Eleanor's friendliness and familiarity disarmed the stoniest of the clerks, and she was conducted to the shipbroker's private room by an usher who bowed before her as if she had been a queen.

The young lady told her story very simply. She wished to ascertain if a gentleman called Launcelot Darrell had sailed in the Princess Alice on the 4th of October, '52.

This was all she said. Richard Thornton stood by, fingering difficult passages in his last

overture on the brim of his hat, out of sheer perturbation of spirit, while he wondered at and admired Miss Vane's placid assurance.

"I shall be extremely obliged if you can give me this information," she said in conclusion, "for a great deal depends upon my being able to ascertain the truth in this matter."

The shipbroker looked through his spectacles at the earnest face turned so trustingly towards his own. He was an old man, with granddaughters as tall as Eleanor, but was nevertheless not utterly dead to the influence of a beautiful face. The auburn hair and diaphanous bonnet made a bright spot of colour in the dinginess of his dusty office.

"I should be very ungallant were I to refuse to serve a young lady," the old man said politely. "Jarvis," he added, turning to the clerk who had conducted Eleanor to his apartment, "do you think you could contrive to look up the list of passengers in the Princess Alice, October 4, '52?"

Mr. Jarvis, who had told Richard to go about his business upon the day before, said he had no doubt he could, and went away to perform this errand.

Eleanor's breath grew short and quick, and her colour rose as she waited for the clerk's return. Richard executed impossible passages on the brim of his hat. The shipbroker watched the girl's face, and drew his own deductions from the flutter of agitation visible in that bright countenance.

"Aha!" he thought, "a love affair, no doubt. This pretty girl in the blue bonnet has come here to look after a runaway sweetheart."

The clerk returned, carrying a ledger, with his thumb between two of the leaves. He opened the uninteresting-looking volume, and laid it on the table before his employer, pointing with his spare forefinger to one particular entry.

"A berth was taken for a Mr. Launcelot Darrell, who was to share his cabin with a Mr. Thomas Halliday," the shipbroker said, looking at the passage to which the clerk pointed.

Eleanor's face crimsoned. She had wronged the widow's son then, after all.

"But the name was crossed out afterwards," continued the old man, "and there's another entry further down, dated October 5th. The ship sailed without Mr. Darrell."

The crimson flush faded out of Eleanor's face

and left it deadly pale. She tottered a few paces towards the table, with her hand stretched out, as if she would have taken the book from the shipbroker and examined the entry for herself. But midway between the chair she had left and the table, her strength failed her, and she would have fallen if Richard Thornton had not dashed his hat upon the ground, and caught her sinking figure in his outstretched arms.

"Dear me!" exclaimed the shipbroker, "bless my soul: a glass of water, Jarvis; this is very sad, very sad, indeed. A runaway lover, I suppose, or a brother, perhaps. These sort of things are always happening. I assure you, if I had the gift that some of you young people have, I could write half a dozen romances out of the history of this office."

The clerk came back with the glass of water; it was rather a murky-looking fluid, but a few drops between Eleanor's pale lips served to bring the life back to her.

She lifted her head with the proud resolution of a queen, and looked at the compassionate shipbroker with a strange smile. She had heard the old man's suppositions about lovers and brothers.

How far away his simple fancy led him from the bitter truth.

She held out her hand to him as she rose from her chair, erect and dauntless as a fair-haired Joan of Arc, ready to gird on the sword in defence of her king and country.

"I thank you very much, sir," she said, "for what you have done for me to-day. My father was an old man; as old or older perhaps than yourself; and he died a very cruel death. I believe that your kindness of this day will help me to avenge him."

CHAPTER VI.

RESOLVED.

LAUNCELOT DARRELL had not sailed for Calcutta in the Princess Alice. This point once established, it was utterly vain for Richard Thornton to argue against that indomitable belief which had taken possession of Eleanor Vane's mind, respecting the identity between the man who had won her father's money at écarté, and Mrs. Darrell's only son.

"I tell you, Richard," she said, when the scene-painter argued with her, "that nothing but proof positive of Launcelot Darrell's absence in India at the date of my father's death would have dispossessed me of the idea that flashed upon me on the day I left Berkshire. He was not in India at that time. He deceived his mother and his friends. He remained in Europe; and led, no doubt, an idle, dissipated life. He must have lived by his wits, for he had no money from his

mother; no one to help him—no profession to support him. What is more likely than that he went to Paris,—the paradise of scoundrels, I have heard you say, Richard,—under an assumed name? What more likely? Why, *he was there!* The man I saw on the Boulevard, and the man I saw in the Windsor street, are one and the same. You cannot argue me out of that conviction, Richard Thornton, for it is the truth. It is the truth, and it shall be the business of my life to prove that it is so."

"And what then, Eleanor?" Mr. Thornton asked gravely. "Supposing you can prove this; by such evidences as will be very difficult to get at; by such an investigation as will waste your life, blight your girlhood, warp your nature, unsex your mind, and transform you from a candid and confiding woman into an amateur detective? Suppose you do all this,—and you little guess, my dear, the humiliating falsehoods, the pitiful deceptions, the studied basenesses, you must practise if you are to tread that sinuous pathway,—what then? What good is effected; what end is gained? Are you any nearer to the accomplishment of the vow you uttered in the Rue de l'Archevêque?"

"What do you mean, Richard?"

"I mean that to prove this man's guilt is not to avenge your father's death. Neither you nor the law has any power to punish him. He may or may not have cheated your poor father. At this distance of time you can prove nothing; except that he played écarté in the private room of a café, and that he won all your father's money. He would only laugh in your face, my poor Nelly, if you were to bring such a charge as this against him."

"If I can once prove that, which I now believe as firmly as if every mortal proof had demonstrated its truth, I know how to punish Launcelot Darrell," replied the girl.

"You know how to punish him?"

"Yes. His uncle—that is to say, his great-uncle—Maurice de Crespigny, was my father's firmest friend. I need not tell you that story, Dick, for you have heard it often enough from my poor father's own lips. Launcelot Darrell hopes to inherit the old man's money, and is, I believe, likely enough to do so. But if I could prove to the old man that my father died a melancholy and untimely death through his nephew's treachery, Launcelot Darrell would

never receive a sixpence of that money. I know how eagerly he looks forward to it, though he affects indifference."

"And you would do this, Eleanor?" asked Richard, staring aghast at his companion; "you would betray the secrets of this young man's youth to his uncle, and compass his ruin by that revelation?"

"I would do what I swore to do in the Rue de l'Archevêque. I would avenge my father's death. The last words my poor father ever wrote appealed to me to do that. I have never forgotten those words. There may have been a deeper treachery in that night's work than you or I know of, Richard. Launcelot Darrell knew who my father was—he knew of the friendship between him and Mr. de Crespigny. How do we know that he did not try to goad the poor old man to that last act of his despair; how do we know that he did not plan those losses at cards, in order to remove his uncle's friend from his pathway? Oh, God! Richard, if I thought that——!"

The girl rose from her chair in a sudden tumult of passion, with her hands clenched and her eyes flashing.

"If I could think that his treachery went

beyond the baseness of cheating my father of his money for the money's sake, I would take *his* life for that dear life as freely and as unhesitatingly as I lift my hand up now."

She raised her clenched hand towards the ceiling as she spoke, as if to register some unuttered vow. Then, turning abruptly to the scene-painter, she said, almost imploringly:

"It can't be, Richard; he cannot have been so base as that. He held my hand in his only a few days ago. I would cut off that hand if I could think that Launcelot Darrell had planned my father's death."

"But you cannot think it, my dear Eleanor," Richard answered, earnestly. "How should the young man know that your father would take his loss so deeply to heart? We none of us calculate the consequences of our sins, my dear. If this man cheated, he cheated because he wanted money. For Heaven's sake, Nelly, leave him and his sin in the hands of Providence. The future is not a blank sheet of paper, for us to write any story we please upon; but a wonderful chart mapped out by a divine and unerring hand. Launcelot Darrell will not go unpunished, my dear. 'My faith is strong in

Time,' as the poet says. Leave the young man to time—and to Providence."

Eleanor Vane shook her head, smiling bitterly at her friend's philosophy. Poor mad Constance's reply always rose, in some shape or other, to the girl's lips in answer to Richard's arguments. The Cardinal reasons with wonderful discretion, but the bereaved mother utters one sentence that is more powerful than all the worthy man's moralities:

"He talks to me, that never had a son!"

"It is no use preaching to me," Miss Vane said. "If *your* father had died by this man's treachery, you would not feel so charitably disposed towards him. I *will* keep the promise made three years ago. I *will* prove Launcelot Darrell's guilt; and that guilt shall stand between him and Maurice de Crespigny's fortune."

"You forget one point in this business, Eleanor."

"What point?"

"It may take you a very long time to obtain the proof you want. Mr. de Crespigny is an old man, and an invalid. He may make a will in Mr. Darrell's favour, and die before you are in a position to tell him of his nephew's treachery to your poor father."

Eleanor was silent for a few moments. Her arched brows contracted, and her mouth grew compressed and rigid.

"I must go back to Hazlewood, Dick," she said, slowly. "Yes, you are right; there is no time to be lost. I *must* go back to Hazlewood."

"That is not very practicable, is it, Nell?"

"I *must* go back. If I go in some disguise—if I go and hide myself in the village, and watch Launcelot Darrell when he least thinks he is observed. I don't care how I go, Richard, but I must be there. It can only be from the discoveries I make in the present, that I shall be able to trace my way back to the history of the past. I must go there."

"And begin at once upon the business of a detective? Eleanor, you shall not do this, if I can prevent you."

Richard Thornton's unavowed love gave him a certain degree of authority over the impulsive girl. There is always a dignity and power in every feeling that is really true. Throughout the story of Notre Dame de Paris, the hunchback's love for Esmeralda is never once contemptible. It is only Phœbus, handsome, glittering, and false, who provokes our scorn.

Eleanor Vane did not rebel against the young man's tone of authority.

"Oh, Dick, Dick," she cried, piteously, "I know how wicked I am. I have been nothing but a trouble to you and the dear Signora. But I cannot forget my father's death. I cannot forget the letter he wrote to me. I must be true to the vow I made then, Richard, if I sacrifice my life in keeping my word."

Eliza Picirillo came in before the scene-painter could reply to this speech. It had been agreed between the two young people that the Signora should know nothing of Miss Vane's discoveries; so Eleanor and Richard saluted the music-mistress in that strain of factitious gaiety generally adopted under such circumstances.

Signora Picirillo's perceptions were perhaps a little blunted by the wear and tear of half-a-dozen hours' labour amongst her out-door pupils, and as Eleanor bustled about the room preparing the tea-table and making the tea, the good music-mistress fully believed in her protégée's simulated liveliness. When the table had been cleared, and Richard had gone to smoke his short meerschaum amongst the damp straw and invalid cabs in the promenade before the Pilas-

ters, Eleanor seated herself at the piano in order to escape the necessity of conversation. Her fingers flew over the keys in a thousand complexities of harmony, but her mind, for ever true to one idea, brooded upon the dark scheme of vengeance which she had planned for herself.

"Come what may," she thought, again and again, "at any price I must go back to Hazlewood."

CHAPTER VII.

THE ONE CHANCE.

ELEANOR VANE lay awake through the greater part of the night which succeeded her interview with the shipbroker. She lay awake, trying to fashion for herself some scheme by which she might go back to Hazlewood. The discovery which she had to make, the proof positive that she wanted to obtain of Launcelot Darrell's guilt, could only be procured by long and patient watching of the young man himself. The evidence that was to condemn him must come from his own lips. Some chance admission, some accidental word, might afford a clue that would guide her back to the secret of the past. But to obtain this clue she must be in intimate association with the man whom she suspected. In the careless confidence of daily life, in the freedom of social intercourse, a hundred chances might

occur which could never be brought about while the gates of Hazlewood were closed upon her.

There was one other chance, it was true. Launcelot Darrell had asked her to become his wife. His love, however feeble to withstand the wear and tear of time, must for the moment, at least, be real. A line from her would no doubt bring him to her side. She could lure him on by affecting to return his affection, and in the entire confidence of such an association she might discover the truth.

No! not for the wide world—not even to be true to her dead father—could she be so false to every sentiment of womanly honour.

"Richard was right," she thought, as she dismissed this idea with a humiliating sense of her own baseness in having even for one brief moment entertained it. "He was right. What shame and degradation I must wade through before I can keep my promise."

And to keep her promise she must go back to Hazlewood. This was the point to which she always returned. But was it possible for her to regain her old position in Mrs. Darrell's house? Would not Mrs. Darrell take care to keep her

away, having once succeeded in banishing her from Launcelot's society?

Miss Vane was not a good schemer. Transparent, ingenuous, and impulsive, she had the will and the courge which would have prompted her to denounce Launcelot Darrell as a traitor and a cheat; but she did not possess one of the attributes which are necessary for the watcher who hopes to trace a shameful secret through all the dark intricacies of the hidden pathway that leads to it.

It was long after daylight when the young lady fell asleep, worn out, harassed, and baffled. The night had brought no counsel. Eleanor Vane dropped off into a fitful slumber, with a passionate prayer upon her lips,—a prayer that Providence would set her in the way of bringing vengeance upon her father's destroyer.

She flung herself upon Providence—after the manner of a great many persons—when she found her own intellect powerless to conduct her to the end she wanted to gain.

Throughout the next day Miss Vane sat alone on the chintz-covered sofa by the window, looking down at the children playing hop-scotch, and gambling for marbles upon the rugged flags

below; "weary of the rolling hours," and unable to bring herself to the frame of mind necessary for the ordinary purposes of life. Upon any other occasion she would have tried to do something whereby she might lighten the Signora's burden, being quite competent to take the pupils off her friend's hands; but to-day she had suffered Eliza Picirillo to trudge out under the broiling August sky, through the stifling London streets, and had made no attempt to lessen her labours. She seemed even incapable of performing the little domestic offices which she had been in the habit of doing. She let the London dust accumulate upon the piano; she left the breakfast-table scattered with the débris of the morning's meal; she made no effort to collect the stray sheets of music, the open books, the scraps of needlework that littered the room; but with her elbow on the smoky sill of the window, and her head resting on her hand, she sat looking wearily out, with eyes that saw nothing but vacancy.

Richard had gone out early, and neither he nor his aunt was expected to return till dusk.

"I can have everything ready for them when they come back," she thought, looking listlessly

at the unwashed tea-things, which seemed to stare at her in mute reproachfulness; and then her eyes wandered back to the sunny window, and her mind returned with a cruel constancy to the one idea that occupied it.

Had she been really looking at the objects on which her eyes seemed to be fixed, she must have been surprised by the advent of a tall and rather distinguished-looking stranger, who made his way along the straw-littered promenade, between the colonnade and the stables, erasing the chalk diagrams of the hop-scotch players with the soles of his boots, and rendering himself otherwise objectionable to the juvenile population.

This stranger came straight to the shop of the shoemaker with whom Signora Picirillo lodged, and inquired for Miss Vincent.

The shoemaker had only heard Eleanor's assumed name a day or two before, when Laura's letter had arrived at the Pilasters. He had a vague idea that the beautiful, golden-haired young woman, who had first entered his dwelling in the early freshness of budding girlhood, was going to distinguish herself as a great musical genius, and intended to astonish the professional world under a false name.

"It's Miss Eleanor you want, I suppose, sir?" the man said, in answer to the stranger's question.

"Miss Eleanor—yes."

"Then, if you'll please to step up-stairs, sir. The young lady's all alone to-day, for Mr. Richard he's over the water a scene-paintin' away for dear life, and the S'nora she's out givin' lessons; so poor young miss is alone, and dismal enough she must be, cooped in-doors this fine weather. It's bad enough when one's obliged to it, you know, sir," the man added, rather obscurely. "Will you please to walk up, sir? It's the door facing you at the top of the stairs."

The shoemaker opened a half-glass door communicating with a dingy back parlour and a steep staircase that twisted corkscrew-wise up to the first floor. The visitor waited for no further invitation, but ascended the stairs in a few strides, and paused for a moment before the door of Signora Picirillo's sitting-room.

"He's one of these here London managers, I dessay," thought the simple cordwainer, as he went back to his work. "Mr. Cromshaw come here one day after Mr. Richard, in a pheeaton

and pair, and no end of diamond rings and breast-pins."

Eleanor Vane had not noticed the stranger's footsteps on the uncarpeted stair, but she started when the door opened, and looked round. Her unexpected visitor was Mr. Monckton.

She rose in confusion, and stood with her back to the window, looking at the lawyer. She was too much absorbed by her one idea to be troubled by the untidiness of the shabby chamber, by the disorder of her own hair or dress, or by any of those external circumstances which are generally so embarrassing to a woman. She only thought of Gilbert Monckton as a link between herself and Hazlewood. She did not even wonder why he had come to see her.

"I may find out something; I may learn something from him," she thought.

Against the great purpose of her life, even this man, who of all others she most respected and esteemed, sank into utter insignificance. She never cared to consider what he might think. She only regarded him as an instrument which might happen to be of use to her.

"You are very much surprised to see me, Miss Vincent," the lawyer said, holding out his hand.

75553

The girl put her hand loosely in his, and Gilbert Monckton started as he felt the feverish heat of the slim fingers that touched his so lightly. He looked into Eleanor's face. The excitement of the last three days had left its traces on her countenance.

Mrs. Darrell had made a confidant of the lawyer. It had been absolutely necessary to explain Eleanor's absence. Mrs. Darrell had given her own version of the business, telling the truth, with sundry reservations. Miss Vincent was a handsome and agreeable girl, she said; it was of vital consequence to Launcelot that he should not form any attachment, or entertain any passing fancy, that might militate against his future prospects. An imprudent marriage had alienated her, Mrs. Darrell, from her uncle, Maurice de Crespigny. An imprudent marriage might ruin the young man's chance of inheriting the Woodlands estate. Under these circumstances it was advisable that Miss Vincent should leave Hazlewood; and the young lady had very generously resigned her situation upon the matter being put before her in a proper light.

Mrs. Darrell took very good care not to make

any allusion to that declaration of love which she had overheard through the half-open door of her son's painting-room.

Mr. Monckton had expressed no little vexation at the sudden departure of his ward's companion; but his annoyance was of course felt solely on account of Miss Mason, who told him, with her eyes streaming, and her voice half-choked by sobs, that she could never, never be happy without her darling Eleanor.

The lawyer said very little in reply to these lamentations, but took care to get Miss Vincent's address from his ward, and on the day after his visit to Hazlewood went straight from his office to the Pilasters.

Looking at the change in Eleanor Vane's face, Mr. Monckton began to wonder very seriously if the departure from Hazlewood had been a matter of indifference to her; and whether it might not be that Mrs. Darrell's alarms about her son's possible admiration for the penniless companion were founded on stronger grounds than the widow had cared to reveal to him.

"I was afraid that Laura's frivolous fancy might be caught by this young fellow," he thought, "but I could never have believed that

this girl, who has ten times Laura's intellect, would fall in love with Launcelot Darrell."

He thought this, while Eleanor's feverish hand lay, loose and passive, in his own.

"It was not quite kind of you to leave Hazlewood without seeing me, or consulting me, Miss Vincent," he said: "you must remember that I confided to you a trust."

"A trust!"

"Yes. You promised that you would look after my foolish young ward, and take care that she did not fall in love with Mr. Darrell."

Mr. Monckton watched the girl's face very closely while he pronounced Launcelot Darrell's name, but there was no revelation in that pale and wearied countenance. The grey eyes returned his gaze, frankly and unhesitatingly. Their brightness was faded; but their innocent candour remained, in all its virginal beauty.

"I tried to do what you wished," Miss Vane answered. "I am afraid that Laura does admire Mr. Darrell. But I can't quite understand whether she is serious or not, and in any case nothing I could say would influence her much, though I know she loves me."

"No, I suppose not," said Mr. Monckton,

rather bitterly, "women are not easily to be influenced in these matters. A woman's love is the sublimation of selfishness, Miss Vincent. It is delightful to a woman to throw herself away; and she is perfectly indifferent as to how many unoffending victims she drags to destruction in her downfall. An Indian woman sacrifices herself out of respect to her dead husband. An English woman offers up her husband and children on the altar of a living lover. Pardon me if I speak too plainly. We lawyers become acquainted with strange stories. I should not at all wonder if my ward were to insist upon making herself miserable for life because Launcelot Darrell has a Grecian nose."

Mr. Monckton seated himself, uninvited, by the table on which the unwashed tea-things bore testimonies to Eleanor's neglect. He looked round the room, but not rudely; for in one brief observant glance he was able to see everything, and to understand everything.

"Have you ever *lived* here, Miss Vincent?" he asked.

"Yes, I lived here a year and a-half before I went to Hazlewood. I was very happy," Eleanor added hastily, as if in deprecation of the

lawyer's look, which betrayed a half-compassionate interest. "My friends are very good to me, and I never wish for a better home."

"But you have been accustomed to a better home, in your childhood?"

"No, not very much better. I always lived in lodgings, with my poor father."

"Your father was not rich, then?"

"No, not at all rich."

"He was a professional man, I suppose?"

"No, he had no profession. He had been rich —very rich—once."

The colour rose to Eleanor's face as she spoke, for she suddenly recollected that she had a secret to keep. The lawyer might recognise George Vane by this description, she thought.

Gilbert Monckton fancied that sudden blush arose from wounded pride.

"Forgive me for asking you so many questions, Miss Vincent," he said gently. "I am very much interested in you. I have been very much interested in you for a long time."

He was silent for some minutes. Eleanor had resumed her seat near the window, and sat in a thoughtful attitude, with her eyes cast upon the ground. She was wondering how she was to

make good use of this interview, and discover as much as possible of Launcelot Darrell's antecedents.

"Will you forgive me if I ask you a few more questions, Miss Vincent?" the lawyer asked, after this brief silence.

Eleanor raised her eyes, and looked him full in the face. That bright, straight, unfaltering gaze was perhaps the greatest charm which Miss Vane possessed. She had no reason to complain that Nature had gifted her with a niggardly hand; she had beauty of feature, of outline, of colour; but this exquisitely candid expression was a rarer beauty, and a higher gift.

"Believe me," said Mr. Monckton, "that I am actuated by no unworthy motive when I ask you to deal frankly with me. You will understand, by-and-by, why and by what right I presume to question you. In the meantime I ask you to confide in me. You left Hazlewood at Mrs. Darrell's wish, did you not?"

"Yes; it was at her wish that I left."

"Her son had made you an offer of his hand?"

The question would have brought a blush to the face of an ordinary girl. But Eleanor Vane was removed from ordinary women by the excep-

tional story of her life. From the moment of her discovery of Launcelot Darrell's identity, all thought of him as a lover, or an admirer, had been blotted out of her mind. He was removed from other men by the circumstances of his guilt; as she was set apart from other women by the revengeful purpose in her breast.

"Yes," she said. "Mr. Darrell asked me to be his wife."

"And did you—did you refuse him?"

"No; I gave him no answer."

"You did not love him, then?"

"Love him! Oh, no, no!"

Her eyes dilated with a look of surprise as she spoke, as if it was most astounding to her that Gilbert Mouckton should ask such a question.

"Perhaps you do not think Launcelot Darrell worthy of a good woman's love?"

"I do not," answered Eleanor. "Don't talk of him, please. At least, I mean, don't talk of him, and of—love," she added hastily, remembering that the very thing she wished was that the lawyer should talk of Launcelot Darrell. "You —you must know a great deal of his youth. He was idle and dissipated, was he not; and—and—a card-player?"

"A card-player?"

"Yes—a gambler; a man who plays cards for the sake of winning money?"

"I never heard any one say so. He was idle, no doubt, and loitered away his time in London under the pretence of studying art; but I never remember hearing that gambling was one of his vices. However, I don't come here to speak of him, but of you. What are you going to do, now that you have left Hazlewood?"

Eleanor was cruelly embarrassed by this question. Her most earnest wish was to return to Hazlewood, or at least to the neighbourhood of Launcelot Darrell's home. Absorbed by this wish she had formed no scheme for the future. She had not even remembered that she stood alone in the world, with only a few pounds saved out of her slender salary, unprovided with that which is the most necessary of all weapons in any warfare, Money!

"I—I scarcely know what I shall do," she said. "Mrs. Darrell promised to procure me a situation."

But as she spoke she remembered that to accept a situation of Mrs. Darrell's getting would be in some manner to eat bread provided by the

kinswoman of her father's foe, and she made a mental vow to starve rather than to receive the widow's patronage.

"I do not put much confidence in Mrs. Darrell's friendship when her own end is gained," Gilbert Monckton said thoughtfully. "Ellen Darrell is only capable of loving one person, and that person is, according to the fashion of the world, the one who has used her worst. She loves her son, Launcelot, and would sacrifice a hecatomb of her fellow-creatures for his advantage. If she can get you a new home, I dare say she will do so. If she cannot, she has succeeded in removing you from her son's pathway, and will trouble herself very little about your future."

Eleanor Vane lifted her head with a sudden gesture of pride.

"I do not want Mrs. Darrell's help," she said.

"But you would not refuse the counsel, or even the help of any one you liked, would you, Eleanor?" returned the lawyer. "You are very young, very inexperienced,—the life at Hazlewood suited you, and it might have gone on for years without danger of unhappiness or disquiet, but for the coming of Launcelot Darrell. I have

known you for a year and a-half, Miss Vincent, and I have watched you very closely. I think I know you very well. Yes, if a lawyer's powers of penetration and habit of observation are to go for anything, I *must* know you by this time. I may have been an egregious fool twenty years ago; but I must be wise enough now to understand a girl of eighteen."

He said this rather as if reasoning with himself than talking to Eleanor. Miss Vane looked at him, wondering what all this talk would lead to, and what motive, under heaven, could have induced a lawyer of high standing to leave his chambers in the middle of the business day, for the purpose of sitting in a shabby lodging-house chamber, with his elbow resting upon a dirty tablecloth amid the confusion of unwashed breakfast cups and saucers.

"Eleanor Vincent," Mr. Monckton said by-and-by, after a very long pause, "country people are most intolerable gossips. You cannot have lived at Hazlewood for a year and a-half without having heard something of my history."

"Your history?"

"Yes, you heard that there was some secret trouble in the early part of my life—that there

were some unpleasant circumstances connected with my purchase of Tolldale."

Eleanor Vane was unskilled in the art of prevarication. She could not give an evasive answer to a straight question.

"Yes," she said, "I have heard people say that."

"And you have no doubt heard them say that my trouble—like every other trouble upon this earth, as it seems to me—was caused by a woman."

"Yes, I heard that."

"I was very young when that sorrow came to me, Eleanor Vincent, and very ready to believe in a beautiful face. I was deceived. My story is all told in those three words, and it is a very old story after all. Great tragedies and epic poems have been written upon the same theme until it has become so hackneyed that I have no need to enlarge upon it. I was deceived, Miss Vincent, and for twenty years I have profited by that bitter lesson. Heaven help me if I feel inclined to forget it now. I am forty years of age, but I do not think that the brightness of my life has quite gone yet. Twenty years ago I was in love, and in the ardour and freshness of my youth, I

dare say I talked a great deal of nonsense. I am in love once more, Eleanor. Will you forgive me if all my faculty for sentimental talk is lost? Will you let me tell you, in very few and simple words, that I love you; that I have loved you for a long time; and that you will make me unspeakably happy if you can think my earnest devotion worthy of some return?"

Every vestige of colour faded slowly from Eleanor's face. There had been a time—before the return of Launcelot Darrell—when a word of praise, an expression of friendliness or regard from Gilbert Monckton, had been very precious to her. She had never taken the trouble to analyse her feelings. That time, before the coming of the young man, had been the sunniest and most careless period of her youth. She had during that interval been false to the memory of her father—she had suffered herself to be happy. But now a gulf yawned between her and that lapse of forgetfulness. She could not look back clearly; she could not remember or recall her former feelings. Gilbert Monckton's offer might then have awakened some answering sentiment in her own breast. Now his hand struck upon the slackened chords of a shattered instrument; and

there was no music to respond harmoniously to the player's touch.

"Can you love me, Eleanor? Can you love me?" the lawyer asked, imploringly, taking the girl's two hands in his own. "Your heart is free: yes, I know that; and that at least is something. Heaven forgive me if I try to bribe you. But my youth is passed, and I can scarcely expect to be loved for myself alone. Think how dreary and undefended your life must be, if you refuse my love and protection. Think of that, Eleanor. Ah! if you knew what a woman is when thrown upon the world *without* the shelter of a husband's love, you would think seriously. I want you to be more than my wife, Eleanor. I want you to be the guardian and protectress of that poor frivolous girl whose future has been trusted to my care. I want you to come and live at Tolldale, my darling, so as to be near that poor child at Hazlewood."

Near Hazlewood! The hot blood rushed into Eleanor's face at the sound of those two words, then faded suddenly away and left her deadly white, trembling and clinging to the back of her chair for support. To all else that Gilbert Monckton had said she had listened in a dull stupor. But now her intellect arose and grasped

the full importance of the lawyer's supplication. In a moment she understood that the one chance which of all other things upon this earth she had most desired, and which of all other things had seemed furthest removed from her, was now within her reach.

She might go back to Hazlewood. She might return as Gilbert Monckton's wife. She did not stop to consider how much was involved in this. It was her nature to be ruled by impulse, and impulse only; and she had yet to learn submission to a better guidance. She could go back to Hazlewood. She would have returned there as a kitchen-maid, had the opportunity of so doing offered itself to her; and she was ready to return as Gilbert Monckton's wife.

"My prayers have been heard," she thought. "My prayers have been heard: Providence will give me power to keep my promise. Providence will set me face to face with that man."

Eleanor Vane stood with her hands clasped upon the back of her chair, thinking of this, and looking straight before her, in utter unconsciousness of the earnest eyes that were fixed upon her face, while the lawyer waited breathlessly to hear her decision.

"Eleanor," he cried, entreatingly, "Eleanor, I have been deceived once; do not let me be a woman's dupe, now that there are streaks of grey amongst my hair. I love you, my dear. I can make you independent and secure; but I do not offer you a fortune or a position of sufficient magnitude or grandeur to tempt an ambitious woman. For God's sake do not trifle with me. If you love me now, or can hope to love me in the future, be my wife. But if any other image holds the smallest place in your heart—if there is one memory, or one regret, that can come between us, Eleanor, dismiss me from you unhesitatingly. It will be merciful to me—to you also, perhaps—to do so. I have seen many a union in which there has been love on one side, and indifference — or something worse than indifference—upon the other. Eleanor, think of all this, and then tell me, frankly, if you can be my wife."

Eleanor Vane dimly comprehended that there was a depth of passionate feeling beneath the quiet earnestness of the lawyer's manner. She tried to listen, she tried to understand; but she could not. The one idea which held possession of her mind, kept that mind locked against every

other impression. It was not his love, it was not his name, or his fortune, that Gilbert Monckton offered her—he offered her the chance of returning to Hazlewood.

"You are very good to me," she said. "I will be your wife. I will go back to Hazlewood."

She held out her hand to him. No trace of womanly confusion, or natural coquetry, betrayed itself in her manner. Pale and absorbed she held out her hand, and offered up her Future as a small and unconsidered matter, when set against the one idea of her life—the promise to her dead father.

CHAPTER VIII.

ACCEPTED.

When a man sets his happiness in the balance, he is apt to be contented with a very slight turning of the scale. He is not likely to be critical as to the wording of the verdict which gives him the prize he has asked for.

Mr. Gilbert Monckton had no contemptible opinion of his own judgment and deliberation, his perceptive faculties and powers of reasoning; but as blindly as Macbeth accepted the promises of the oracular voices in the witches' cave, so did this grave and eminent lawyer receive those few cold words in which Eleanor Vane consented to be his wife.

It was not that he refrained from reflecting upon the girl's manner of accepting his offer. He did reflect upon it; and proved to himself, by unerring logic, that she could scarcely have spoken in any other way. There were a thousand reasons why

she should have employed those very words, and pronounced them in that very tone. Maidenly modesty, innocent surprise, inexperience, girlish timidity:—he ran over a whole catalogue of causes, naming every possible cause, save one, and that one was the thing he had most dreaded—indifference, or even repugnance to himself. He looked into her face. His professional career had given him the faculty of putting together the evidences of smiles and frowns, involuntary contractions of the eyebrows, scarcely perceptible compressions of the lips, every tone and semi-tone in the facial diapason. He looked at Eleanor Vane's face, and said to himself:

"This girl *cannot* be mercenary. She is as pure as an angel; as unselfish as Jephtha's daughter; as brave as Judith, or Joan of Arc. She *cannot* be anything but a good wife. The man who wins her has reason to thank God for his bounty."

It was with such thoughts as these that the lawyer received the feminine decision which was to influence his future life. He bent over the girl's fair head—tall as she was, her face was only on a level with Gilbert Monckton's shoulder—and pressed his lips to her forehead, solemnly, almost as if setting a seal upon his own.

"My darling," he said, in a low voice, "my darling, you have made me very happy; I dare not tell you how much I love you. I struggled against my love, Eleanor. I once meant to have kept the secret till I went down to my grave. I think I could have kept silence so long as you remained within my reach, protected and sheltered by people whom I could trust, happy in the bright years of your innocent girlhood. But when you left Hazlewood, when you went out into the world, my courage failed. I wanted to give you my love as a shield and a defence. Better that I should be deceived, I thought; better that I should be miserable, than that she should be undefended."

Eleanor Vane listened to the lawyer's happy talk. He could have talked to her for ever, now that the ice was broken, and the important step —so long considered, so long avoided—actually taken. It seemed as if his youth came back to him, bestowed by some miraculous power; invisible, but most palpably present in that shabby Bloomsbury dwelling. His youth came back: the intellectual cobwebs of twenty years were swept away by one stroke of some benevolent witch's broomstick. Cherished prejudices, fondly

nursed doubts and suspicions, were blotted out of his mind, leaving the tablet fair and bright as it had been before the coming of that shadow which had darkened so much of this man's life. Sudden almost as the conversion of Saul, was this transformation of the misanthropical solicitor under the master influence of a true and pure affection.

For twenty years he had sneered at women, and at men's belief in them; and now, at the end of twenty years, he believed; and, escaping out of the prison which he had made for himself, he spread his recovered wings and was free.

A sigh escaped from Eleanor's lips as she listened to her lover. The time in which she could have hoped to pay him back all this great debt which he was heaping upon her, was past and gone. She felt a sense of oppression beneath the load of this obligation. She began to perceive —as yet only dimly, so intense was the egotism engendered out of the single purpose of her life— that she was binding herself to something that she might not be able to perform; she was taking upon herself a debt that she could scarcely hope to pay. For a moment she thought this, and was ready, under this new impulse, to draw back and say, "I cannot become your wife; I am too much

tied and bound by the obligations of the past, to be able to fulfil the duties of the present. I am set apart from other women, and must stand alone until the task I have set myself is accomplished, or the hope of its fulfilment abandoned."

She thought this, and the words trembled on her lips; but in the next moment the image of her father arose angry and reproachful, as if to say to her, "Have you so little memory of my wrongs and my sorrows that you can shrink from any means of avenging me?"

This idea banished every other consideration.

"I will keep my promise first, and do my duty to Gilbert Monckton afterwards, thought Eleanor. "It will be easy to be a good wife to him. I used to like him very much."

She recalled the old days in which she had sat a little way apart from the lawyer and his ward, envying Laura Mason her apparent influence over Mr. Monckton; and for a moment a faint thrill of pleasure and triumph vibrated through her veins as she remembered that henceforth her claim upon him would be higher than that of any other living creature. He would be her own—her lover, her husband—adviser, friend, instructor; everything in the wide world to her.

"Oh, let me avenge my father's cruel death," she thought, "and then I may be a good and happy wife."

Mr. Monckton could have stood for ever by the side of his betrothed wife in the sunny window looking out upon the mews. The prospect of the half-open stable doors; the louuging grooms smoking and drinking in the intervals of their labour; the scantily draperied women hanging out newly-washed linen, and making as it were triumphal arches of wet garments across the narrow thoroughfare; the children playing hop-scotch, or called away from that absorbing diversion to fetch damp steaming quartern loaves and jugs of beer for their elders,—all these things were beautiful in the eyes of the owner of Tolldale Priory. An overplus of that sunshine which filled his own breast glorified these common objects, and Mr. Monckton gazed upon the angular proportions of the bony Roman-nosed horses, the classic outlines of decrepit Hansom cabs, and all the other objects peculiar to the neighbourhood of the Pilasters, with such a radiance of contentment and delight upon his countenance as might have induced the observer, looking at the lawyer's face and *not* at the prospect, to believe that the bay of Naples

was spread out in purple splendour under the open window of Miss Vane's sitting-room.

Signora Picirillo returned from her day's labours, and found Eleanor's visitor thus absorbed; but he understood directly who she was, and greeted her with a cordiality that very much astonished the music mistress. Eleanor Vane slipped out of the room while Mr. Monckton was explaining himself to the Signora. She was only too glad to get away from the man to whom she had so rashly bound herself. She went to the glass to brush her hair away from her hot forehead, and then threw herself on the bed, prostrated by all the excitement she had undergone, powerless even to think.

"I almost wish I could lie here for ever," she thought; "it seems so like peace to lie still and leave off thinking." Her youth had held out bravely against the burdens she had put upon her strength and spirits, but the young energies had given way at last, and she fell into a heavy dreamless slumber; a blessed and renovating sleep, from which nature takes compensation for the wrongs that have been done her.

Gilbert Monckton told his story very briefly and simply. He had no occasion to say much himself, for Eleanor had written a great deal

about him in her letters to the Signora, and had often talked of him during her one holiday at the Pilasters.

Eliza Picirillo was too entirely unselfish to feel otherwise than pleased at the idea that Eleanor Vane had won the love of a good man, whose position in life would remove her from every danger and from every trial. But, mingled with this unselfish delight, there was a painful recollection. The music mistress had fathomed her nephew's secret; and she felt that Eleanor's marriage would be a sad blow to Richard Thornton.

"I don't believe poor Dick ever hoped to win her love," Signora Picirillo thought; "but if he could have gone on loving her and admiring her, and associating with her, in a frank brotherly way, he might have been happy. Perhaps it's better as it is, though; perhaps that very uncertainty might have blighted his life and shut him out from some possible happiness."

"As my dear girl is an orphan," Gilbert Monckton said, "I feel that you, Madame Picirillo, are the only person I need consult. I have heard from Eleanor how much she owes you; and believe me that when I ask her to become my

wife, I do not wish her to be less your adopted daughter. She has told me that in the greatest miseries of her life, you were as true a friend to her as her own mother could have been. She has never told me what those miseries were, but I trust her so fully that I do not care to torment her with questions about a past which she tells me was sorrowful."

Eliza Picirillo's eyelids fell under the earnest gaze of the lawyer; she remembered the deception that had been practised upon Mrs. Darrell in deference to the pride of Eleanor's half-sister.

"This Mr. Monckton must know Nelly's story before he marries her," thought the straightforward Signora. She explained this to Eleanor the next morning when the girl rose, invigorated by a long sleep, and inspired by a desperate hopefulness—the hope of speedily avenging her father's wrongs.

For some time Miss Vane passionately combated the Signora's arguments. Why should she tell Gilbert Monckton her real name? she demanded. She wished to keep it a secret from Mr. de Crespigny; from the people at Hazlewood. She must keep it a secret, she said.

But little by little Eliza Picirillo overcame this

determination. She explained to the passionate girl that if her marriage was to be legally unassailable, she must be married in her true name. She explained this; and she said a great deal about the moral wrong which would be done if Eleanor persisted in deceiving her future husband.

The marriage was pushed on with terrible haste, as it seemed to Richard Thornton and the Signora; but even the brief delay that occurred between Gilbert Monckton's declaration of his love and the day fixed for the wedding was almost intolerable to Eleanor. The all-important step which was to make her the lawyer's wife seemed nothing to her. She ignored this great crisis of her life altogether, in her desire to return to Hazlewood, to discover and denounce Launcelot Darrell's treachery before Maurice de Crespigny's death.

There were preparations to be made, and a trousseau to be provided. It was a very simple trousseau, fitter for the bride of some young curate with seventy pounds a year, than for the lady who was to be mistress of Tolldale Priory. Eleanor took no interest in the pretty girlish dresses, pale and delicate in colour, simple and inexpensive in texture and fashion, which the Signora chose for

her protégée. There was a settlement to be drawn up also; for Gilbert Monckton insisted upon treating his betrothed as generously as if she had been a woman of distinction, with an aristocratic father to bargain and diplomatise for her welfare; but Eleanor was as indifferent to the settlement as about the trousseau, and could scarcely be made to understand that, on and after her wedding-day, she would be the exclusive possessor of a small landed estate worth three hundred a year.

Once, and once only, she thanked Gilbert Monckton for his generosity; and this was when, for the first time, the thought flashed into her mind, that this three hundred a year, to which she was so indifferent, would enable her to place Eliza Picirillo in a position of independence.

"Dear Signora," she cried, "you shall never work after I am married. How good it is of you to give me this money, Mr. Monckton," she added, her eyes filling with sudden tears; "I will try to deserve your goodness, I will indeed."

It was upon the evening on which Eleanor spoke these few grateful and earnest words to her betrothed husband, that the revelation of her secret was made.

"I am going to Doctors' Commons to-morrow

morning, Signora," the lawyer said, as he rose to leave the little sitting-room,—he had spent his evenings in the Pilasters during his brief courtship, perfectly at home and unspeakably happy in that shabby and Bohemian colony. "Eleanor and I have determined that our marriage is to take place at St. George's, Bloomsbury. It is to be a very quiet wedding. My two partners, yourself, and Mr. Thornton, are to be the only witnesses. The Berkshire people will be surprised when I take my young wife back to Tolldale."

He was going away, when the Signora laid her hand on Eleanor's shoulder.

"You *must* tell him to-night, Nelly," she whispered; "he must not be allowed to take out the licence in a false name."

The girl bent her head.

"I will do as you wish, Signora," she said.

Five minutes afterwards, when Gilbert Monckton gave Eleanor his hand, she said, quietly:

"Do not say good night yet. I will come downstairs with you, I have something to say to you."

She went down the narrow staircase, and out into the colonnade with Mr. Monckton. It was

ten o'clock; the shops were closed, and the public-house was quiet. Under the August moonlight the shabby tenements looked less commonplace, the dilapidated wooden colonnade was almost picturesque. Miss Vane stood with her face turned frankly towards her lover, her figure resting slightly against one of the slender pillars before the shoemaker's emporium.

"What is it that you want to tell me, Eleanor dearest?" Mr. Monckton asked, as she paused, looking half-doubtfully in his face, uncertain what she should say to him.

"I want to tell you that I have done very wrong—I have deceived you."

"Deceived me! Eleanor! Eleanor!"

She saw the lawyer's face turn pale under the moonlight. That word deception had such a terrible meaning to him.

"Yes, I have deceived you. I have kept a secret from you, and I can only tell it to you now upon one condition."

"Upon what condition?"

"That you do not tell it to Mr. de Crespigny, or to Mrs. Darrell, until you have my permission to do so."

Gilbert Monckton smiled. His sudden fears

fled away before the truthfulness of the girl's voice, the earnestness of her manner.

"Not tell Mr. de Crespigny, or Mrs. Darrell?" he said, "of course not, my dear. Why should I tell them anything which concerns you, and that you wish me to keep from them?"

"You promise, then?"

"Most certainly."

"You give me your solemn promise that you will not tell Mr. de Crespigny, or any member of his family, the secret which I am going to confide to you; under no circumstances whatever, will you be tempted to break that promise?"

"Why, Nelly," cried Mr. Monckton, "you are as serious as if you were the chief of a political society, about to administer some terrible oath to a neophyte. I shall not break my promise, my dear, believe me. My profession has accustomed me to keeping secrets. What is it, Eleanor; what is this tremendous mystery?"

Miss Vane lifted her eyes, and looked full in her lover's face, upon the watch for any change of expression that might indicate displeasure or contempt. She was very fearful of losing the lawyer's confidence and esteem.

"When I went to Hazlewood," she said, "I

went in a false name, not at my own wish, but to please my sister, who did not want Mrs. Darrell to know that any member of her family could be in a dependent position. My name is not Vincent. I am Eleanor Vane, the daughter of Mr. de Crespigny's old friend."

Gilbert Monckton's astonishment was unbounded. He had heard George Vane's history from Mrs. Darrell, but he had never heard of the birth of the old man's youngest daughter.

"Eleanor Vane," he said; "then Mrs. Bannister is your sister."

"She is my half-sister, and it was at her wish that I went to Hazlewood under a false name. You are not angry with me for having done so, are you?"

"Angry with you? No, my dear, the deception was harmless enough; though it was a piece of foolish pride upon your sister's part. My Eleanor was in no way degraded by having to turn her accomplishments to use and profit. My poor self-reliant girl," he added, tenderly, "going out into the world with a secret to keep. But why do you wish this secret to be still preserved, Eleanor; you are not ashamed of your father's name?"

"Ashamed of his name? Oh, no, no!"

"Why keep your real name a secret, then?"

"I can't tell you why. But you'll keep your promise. You are too honourable to break your promise."

Mr. Monckton looked wonderingly at the girl's earnest face.

"No, my dear, I won't break my promise," he said. "But I can't understand your anxiety for this concealment. However, we will say nothing more about it, Nelly," he added, as if in reply to an appealing look from Miss Vane; "your name will be Monckton when you go back to Berkshire; and nobody will dare to question your right to that name."

The lawyer put his lips to the girl's forehead, and bade her good night upon the threshold of the shoemaker's door.

"God bless you, my own darling!" he said, in a very low voice, "and preserve our faith in each other. There must be no secrets between you and me, Nelly."

CHAPTER IX.

AN INSIDIOUS DEMON.

On a bright September morning a hired carriage took Miss Vane and her friends to the quiet old church in Hart Street, Bloomsbury. There was a little crowd assembled about the door of the shoemaker's dwelling, and sympathetic spectators were scattered here and there in the mews, for a marriage is one of those things which the cleverest people can never contrive to keep a secret.

Miss Eleanor Vane's pale fawn-coloured silk dress, black mantle, and simple white bonnet did not form the established costume of a bride, but the young lady looked so very beautiful in her girlish dress and virginal innocence, that more than one of the lounging grooms who came out of the stables to see her go by to her hired carriage, confidentially remarked to an acquaintance that he only wished he could get such a young woman for *his* missus. Richard Thornton was

not in attendance upon the fair young bride. There was was a scene to be painted for Spavin and Cromshaw upon that particular day which was more important than any scene Dick had ever painted before. So the young man set out early upon that September bridal morning, after saluting Eleanor Vane in the most tender and brotherly fashion: but I am sorry to say that instead of going straight to the Royal Phœnix Theatre, Mr. Thornton walked with a slow and listless gait across Westminster Bridge, then plunged with a sudden and almost ferocious impetus into the remotest intricacies of Lambeth, scowling darkly at the street boys who came in his way, skirting the Archbishop's palace, glowering at the desolation of Vauxhall, and hurrying far away into the solitudes of Battersea fields, where he spent the better part of the afternoon in the dreary parlour of an obscure public-house, drinking adulterated beer, and smoking bad tobacco.

The Signora wore a rustling black silk dress —Eleanor's present of the previous Christmas— in honour of her protégée's wedding; but Eliza Picirillo's heart was sadly divided upon this quiet bridal day; half rejoicing in Miss Vane's fortune

and advancement; half sorrowful for poor desolate Dick wandering away amongst the swamps by the waterside.

Mr. Monckton and his two partners were waiting for the bride in the portico of the church. The senior of the two, an old man with white hair, was to give Eleanor away, and paid her many appropriate though rather obsolete compliments upon the occasion. Perhaps it was now for the first time that Miss Vane began to regard the step she was about to take as one of a somewhat serious and indeed awful nature; perhaps it was now for the first time that she began to think she had committed a sin in accepting Gilbert Monckton's love so lightly.

"If he knew that I did not promise to marry him because I loved him, but because I wanted to get back to Hazlewood," she thought.

But presently the grave shadows passed away from her face and a faint blush rose to her cheek and brow.

"I will love him by-and-by, when I have avenged my father's death," she said to herself.

Some such thought as this was in her mind when she took her place beside Gilbert Monckton at the altar.

The autumn sunshine streamed in upon them through the great windows of the church, and wrapped them in yellow light, like the figures of Joseph and Mary in an old picture. The bride and bridegroom looked very handsome standing side by side in this yellow sunshine. Gilbert Monckton's twenty years' seniority only dignified and exalted him; investing the holy marriage promise of love and protection with a greater solemnity that it could have had when spoken by a stripling of one or two and twenty.

Everything seemed auspicious upon this wedding morning. The lawyer's partners were in the highest spirits, the beadle and pew-opener were elevated by the idea of prospective donations. The Signora wept quietly while the marriage service was being read, thinking of her nephew Richard smoking and drinking desperately, perhaps, in his desolate painting-room: but when the ceremony was over the good music-mistress dried her tears, banishing all traces of sorrow before she kissed and complimented the bride.

"You are to come and see us at the Priory, dear Signora," Eleanor said, as she clung about her friend before leaving the vestry; "Gilbert says so, you know."

Her voice faltered a little, and she glanced shyly at her husband as she spoke of him by his christian name. It seemed as if she had no right to allude so familiarly to Mr. Monckton, of Tolldale Priory. And presently Eliza Picirillo stood alone—or attended only by the beadle, obsequiously attentive in proportion to the liberality of the donation he had just received—under the portico of the Bloomsbury church, watching the lawyer's carriage drive away towards the Great Northern railway station. Mr. Monckton, in the absence of any preference upon Eleanor's part, had chosen a quiet Yorkshire watering-place as the scene of his honeymoon.

Signora Picirillo sighed as she went down the steps before the church, and took her seat in the hired vehicle that was to take her back to the Pilasters.

"So Bloomsbury has seen the last of Eleanor," she thought, sadly; "we may go down to see her, perhaps, in her grand new house, but she will never come back to us. She will never wash the tea-things and make tea and toast again for a tired-out old music-mistress."

The dying glory of red and orange in the last

sunset of September sank behind the grey line of the German Ocean, after the closing day of Gilbert Monckton's honeymoon. Upon the first of October the lawyer was to take his young wife to Tolldale Priory. Mr. and Mrs. Monckton walked upon the broad sands as that low orange light faded out of the western sky. The lawyer was grave and silent, and every now and then cast a furtive glance at his companion's face. Sometimes that glance was succeeded by a sigh.

Eleanor was paler and more careworn than she had looked since the day after her visit to the shipbroker's office. The quiet and seclusion of the place to which Gilbert Monckton had brought his bride had given her ample opportunity of brooding on the one idea of her life. Had he plunged her into a vortex of gaiety, it is possible that she might have been true to that deep-rooted purpose which she had so long nursed in her breast; but on the other hand, there would have been some hope that the delights of change and novelty, delights to which youth cannot be indifferent—might have beguiled the bride from that for-ever-recurring train of thought which separated her from her husband as effectually as if an ocean had rolled between them.

Yes, Gilbert Monckton had discovered the fatal truth that marriage is not always union, and that the holiest words that were ever spoken cannot weave the mystic web which makes two souls indissolubly one, if there be one inharmonious thread in the magical fabric. Gilbert Monckton felt this, and knew that there was some dissonant note in the chord which should have been such a melodious combination.

Again and again, while talking to his wife—carried away, perhaps, by the theme of which he was speaking, and counting on her sympathy as a matter of course—he had looked into Eleanor's face, and seen that her thoughts had wandered far away from him and his conversation, into some unknown region. He had no clue by which he could follow those wanderings; no chance word ever fell from his wife's lips which might serve as the traitor silk that guided ruthless Eleanor to Rosamond's hiding-place. So thus, before the honeymoon was over, Gilbert Monckton began to be jealous of his bride, thereby fostering for himself a nest of scorpions, or a very flock of young vultures, which were henceforth to make their meals off his entrails.

But it was not the ferocious or Othello-like

jealousy. The green-eyed monster did not appear under his more rugged and uncivilised form, finding a vent for his passions in pillows, poison, and poniards. The monster disguised himself as a smooth and philosophical demon. He hid his diabolical attributes under the gravity and wisdom of a friendly sage. In other words, Gilbert Monckton, feeling disappointed at the result of his marriage, set himself to reason upon the fact; and was for ever torturing himself with silent arguments and mute conjectures as to the cause of that indescribable something in his young wife's manner, which told him there was no perfect union between them. The lawyer reproached himself for his weak folly in having built a fairy palace of hope upon the barren fact of Eleanor's acceptance of his hand. Did not girls, situated as George Vane's daughter had been situated, marry for money, again and again, in these mercenary days? Who should know this better than Gilbert Monckton the solicitor, who had drawn up so many marriage settlements, been concerned in so many divorces, and assisted at so many matrimonial bargains, whose sordid motives were as undisguised as in any sale of cattle transacted in the purlieus of Smithfield? Who should know

better than he, that beautiful and innocent girls every day bartered their beauty and innocence for certain considerations set down by grave lawyers, and engrossed upon sheets of parchment at so much per sheet?

He did know this, and in his mad arrogance he had said to himself, "I—amongst all other men—will be an exception to the common rule. The girl I marry is poor; but she will give herself to me for no meaner considerations than my love, and my truth, and my devotion; and those shall be hers until my dying day."

Gilbert Monckton had said this; and already a mocking demon had made a permanent perch for himself upon this wretched man's shoulders, for ever whispering insidious doubts into his ear, for ever instilling shadowy fears into his mind.

Eleanor had not seemed happy during those few honeymoon weeks. She had grown weary of the broad sands stretching far away, flat and desolate under the September sky, and weary of the everlasting and unbroken line that bounded that wide grey sea. This weariness she had displayed frankly enough; but she had not revealed its hidden source, which lay in her feverish impatience to go back to the neighbourhood of

Hazlewood, and to make the discovery she wished to make, before Maurice de Crespigny's death.

She had sounded her husband upon the subject of the old man's health.

"Do you think Mr. de Crespigny will live long?" she asked, one day.

"Heaven knows, my dear," the lawyer answered carelessly. "He has been an invalid for nearly twenty years now, and he may go on being an invalid for twenty years more, perhaps. I fancy that his death will be very sudden whenever it does happen."

"And do you think that he will leave his money to Launcelot Darrell?"

Eleanor's face grew a little paler as she mentioned the young man's name. The invisible familiar perched upon Mr. Monckton's shoulder directed the lawyer's attention to that fact.

"I don't know. Why should you be interested in Mr. Darrell's welfare?"

"I am not interested in his welfare, I only asked you a question, Gilbert."

Even the malice of the familiar could take no objection to the tone in which Eleanor said this: and Mr. Monckton was ashamed of the passing

twinge which Launcelot Darrell's name had caused him.

"I dare say De Crespigny will leave his money to young Darrell, my dear," he said, in a more cordial voice; "and though I have no very high opinion of the young man's character, I think he ought to have the fortune. The maiden ladies should have annuities, of course. Heaven knows they have fought hard enough for the prize."

"How can people act so contemptibly for the sake of money!" cried Eleanor, with sudden indignation.

The lawyer looked admiringly at her glowing face, which had crimsoned with the intensity of her feeling. She was thinking of her father's death, and of that hundred pounds which had been won from him on the night of his suicide.

"No," thought Mr. Monckton, "she cannot be mercenary. That bright, impulsive creature could never be guilty of any deliberate meanness, —and what could be a worse meanness than that of the woman who could marry a man out of sordid and mercenary motives, beguiling him by a simulated affection, in order to compass her own advancement?

"If I have won her heart, in its untainted

freshness," thought Gilbert Monckton, "I must be content, though that girlish heart may seem cold. She will love me better by-and-by. She will learn to confide in me; she will learn to sympathise with me."

By such arguments as these Mr. Monckton endeavoured to satisfy himself, and sometimes, indeed, succeeded in doing so,—that his young wife's absent and thoughtful manner was a matter of course; the thoughtfulness of a girl unused to her new position, and perhaps a little bewildered by its strangeness. But on the morning of the 1st of October, Gilbert Monckton perceived a change in Eleanor's manner, and on that morning the demon familiar took up a permanent station upon the lawyer's shoulder.

Mrs. Monckton was no longer grave and listless. A feverish impatience, a sudden flow of high spirits, seemed to have taken possession of her.

"You observe," whispered the demon familiar, as Mr. Monckton sat opposite his wife in a compartment of the express train that was to take them to London, *en route* for Berkshire, "you observe the glow in her cheeks, the brightness of her eyes. You saw her turn pale the other day when she mentioned Launcelot Darrell's name.

You know what the young man's mother told you. You can do the commonest sum in logical arithmetic, I suppose. You can put two and two together. Your wife has been wearied to death of the north, and the sea, and the sands; and of *you.* She is in high spirits to-day, and it is very easy to account for the change in her manner. She is glad to go back to Berkshire—she is glad to go back there, because *she will see Launcelot Darrell.*"

Mr. Monckton, with a cambric handkerchief thrown over his face, kept a covert watch upon his wife from between its artfully-adjusted folds, and enjoyed such converse as this with the spirit he had chosen for his companion.

CHAPTER X.

SLOW FIRES.

THE new life which began for Eleanor Monckton at Tolldale Priory seemed very strange to her. The prim respectability of the old mansion weighed heavily upon her spirits. The best part of her existence had been spent in a very free-and-easy and Bohemian manner; and her improved position was at first more strange than pleasant to her. The well-trained servants who waited upon her in respectful silence, acknowledging her as their mistress, and obsequiously eager to give her pleasure, were very different people to the familiar landladies of those lodgings in which she had lived with her father, or the good-natured shoemaker-landlord at the Pilasters.

At Hazlewood she had been only a dependant; and those who served her had given her their service out of love for her brightness and beauty;

rendering her little benefits with frank smiles and familiar greetings. But the mistress of Tolldale had a certain dignity to support; and new duties to learn in her new position.

At first those duties seemed very hard to the impulsive girl, who had a sort of instinctive contempt for all ceremonial usages and stereotyped observances. They seemed more especially hard, perhaps, because Gilbert Monckton expected his young wife to assume her new position as a thing of course, and was inclined to be very jealous of any omission that derogated from her dignity.

He was inclined to be jealous of her girlish inconstancy of thought and action, seeing in all this an evidence that she regretted the freedom of her girlhood. He was inclined to be jealous. That one sentence reveals the secret of a great deal of misery which this gentleman made for himself. He was inclined to be jealous of anything and everything, where his young wife was concerned.

It was thus that Gilbert Monckton began his married life. It was thus that, of his own doing, he set a breach between himself and the woman he idolised. And when the breach was made,

and the dreary gulf of distrust and misapprehension stretched black and impassable between this weak man and that which he loved dearest in all the world, he could only cast himself down beside the yawning ravine and bemoan his desolation.

I have called Gilbert Monckton a weak man advisedly. In all the ordinary business of life, and in all the extraordinary businesses that fell in his professional pathway, the lawyer's clearness of perception and power of intellect were unsurpassed by any of his compeers. Strong; stern; decided and unyielding, where his judgment was once formed; he was trusted as an oracle by those who had dealings with him. But in his love for his wife he was weaker and more irresolute than any desponding swain of five-and-twenty.

He had been deceived once by a woman whom he had loved as he now loved Eleanor; and he could not forget that early deception. The shadow that had fallen upon his life was not to be lifted off by any sunshine of trust and love. He had been deceived once, and he might be deceived again.

The wrong which a woman's falsehood does to the man whom she betrays is a lasting and some-

times irrecoverable wrong. The wound festers, deep down below the outer scar; and while sympathetic friends are rejoicing in the slow obliteration of that surface evidence of the past, the hidden canker still endures, gaining force by time.

The secret sorrow of Gilbert Monckton's youth had made him suspicious of all womanly truth and purity. He watched his wife, as it had been his habit to watch his ward, doubtfully and fearfully: even when he most admired her, regarding her in some wise as a capricious and irresponsible being, who might at any moment turn upon him and betray him.

He had fought against his love for his ward's beautiful companion. He had tried to shut his mind against all consciousness of her fascinations; he had endeavoured not to believe in her. If she had stayed at Hazlewood, that silent struggle might have gone on in the lawyer's breast for years; but her sudden departure had taken the grave man of forty off his guard. Hurried away by an impulse, he had revealed the secret that had been so skilfully repressed, and, for the second time in his life, perilled his happiness upon the hazard of a woman's truth.

"What do I know of her more than I knew of Margaret Ravenshaw?" he thought, sometimes; "can I trust her because she looks full in my face, with eyes that are as clear as the sky above my head? There is generally some landmark by which a man's character can be understood, however practised he may be in hypocrisy; but a woman—— Bah! a woman's beauty defies a physiognomist. We trust and believe because we admire. 'She can't be wicked with such a Grecian nose,' we say. 'Those red, smiling lips cannot speak anything but the truth!'"

If Gilbert Monckton's young wife had seemed happy in her new home, he would have accepted the fair omen, and would have sunned himself in the brightness of her gaiety. But she was not happy; he could clearly see that; and day and night he tormented himself with vain endeavours to find out the cause of her uncertain spirits, her fits of abstraction, her long pauses of thoughtful silence.

And while Mrs. Monckton's husband was nursing all these tortures, and every day widening the gulf of his own making, his wife, absorbed by her own secret purpose, was almost unconscious

of all else in the world. If she saw the lawyer's face thoughtful or gloomy, she concluded that his moodiness arose from business anxieties with which she had no concern. If he sighed, she set down his melancholy to the same professional causes. A tiresome will case, a troublesome chancery suit —something in those dusty offices had annoyed him; and that professional something had of course no concern for her.

Eleanor Monckton had taken upon herself an unnatural office; she had assumed an abnormal duty; and her whole life fashioned itself to fit that unwomanly purpose. She abnegated the privileges, and left unperformed the duties, of a wife—true to nothing except to that fatal promise made in the first madness of her grief for George Vane's death.

She had been more than a week at Tolldale Priory, and she had not advanced one step upon the road which she had so desperately determined to pursue. She had not yet seen Launcelot Darrell.

Gilbert Monckton had spent the day after his return to Berkshire in riding about the neighbourhood, calling upon those few people with whom he kept up any acquaintance, and inform-

ing them of his marriage with the young lady who, a few weeks before, had been the companion of his ward. Of course he received friendly congratulations and good wishes from every one to whom he imparted this intelligence; and of course when his back was turned, the same people who had tendered those good wishes set to work to wonder at his folly, and to prognosticate all manner of evil from his absurd and imprudent marriage.

His longest visit was paid to Hazlewood, and here his tidings afforded real and unmixed satisfaction. Launcelot Darrell was at work in his painting-room, and was therefore out of the way of hearing the news. The widow was pleased to think that Eleanor's marriage would secure her son against the immediate danger of taking a penniless wife; and Laura was sincerely rejoiced at the idea of seeing her friend again.

"I may come to Tolldale soon, mayn't I, Mr. Monckton?" she asked. "Dear Nelly, I do so long to see her! But to think of her being married to you! I never was so surprised in my life. Why you must be old enough to be her father. It does seem so funny!"

Gilbert Monckton did not feel particularly

grateful to his ward for the extreme candour of these remarks, but he invited the young lady to spend the following day with Eleanor.

"I shall be in town to-morrow," he said, "and I dare say Mrs. Monckton will find the Priory dull."

"Mrs. Monckton!" cried Laura; "oh, to be sure; why, that's Nelly, of course! Find the Priory dull? Yes, I should think she would indeed! Poor Eleanor, in those damp, overgrown gardens, with the high walls all round, and the tops of the trees above the walls. How lonely she'll be."

"Lonely! I shall come home to dinner every day."

"Yes, at seven o'clock; and from breakfast-time till seven poor Nell must amuse himself in the best way she can. But I'm not going to grumble; I'm only too happy to think she will be near me."

Mr. Monckton stood by the garden-gate—that gate near which he had so often loitered with Eleanor—listening with no very great satisfaction to his ward's frivolous prattle. His young wife would feel unhappy in the dulness of her new life, perhaps. If that were to be so, it would be

proof positive that she did not love him. He could never have felt dull or lonely in her society, though Tolldale had been some grim and isolated habitation in the middle of an African desert.

"So you think she will be dull, Laura?" he said, rather despondently.

"Why *of course* she will," answered the young lady; "but now don't think me inquisitive, please," she added, in a very insinuating tone, "but I do *so* much want you to tell me something."

"You want me to tell you what?" asked the lawyer, rather sharply.

Laura linked her hand through his arm, and raising herself on tip-toe, so as to bring her rosy lips within easier reach of his ear, whispered archly,

"Does she *really* love you? Was it *really* a love-match?"

Gilbert Monckton started as violently as if that infantine whisper had been the envenomed hiss of a snake.

"What do you mean, child?" he said, turning sharply upon his ward; "of course Eleanor and I married because we loved each other? Why else should we have married?"

"No, to be sure. Girls marry for money sometimes. I heard Mrs. Darrell say that one of the Penwoods, of Windsor, married a horrid, old rich city man for the sake of his money. But I don't think Eleanor would do that sort of thing. Only it seems so funny that she should have been in love with you all the time."

"All what time?"

"Why all the time she and I were together. How could she help talking of you, I wonder?"

The lawyer bit his lip.

"She never talked of me, then?" he said, with a feeble attempt to make his tone careless.

"Oh, yes, she spoke of you sometimes, of course; but not in that way."

"Not in what way? When will you learn to express yourself clearly, Miss Mason? Are you going to be a child all your life?"

Gilbert Monckton's ward looked up at him with a half comic look of terror. He was not accustomed to speak so sharply to her.

"Don't be angry, please," she said, "I know I don't always express myself clearly. I dare say it's because I used to get other girls to do my themes—they call exercises in composition themes, you know—when I was at school. I mean that

Eleanor didn't talk of you as if she was in love with you—not as I talk—not as I *should* talk of any one if I were in love with them," added the young lady, blushing very much as she corrected herself.

Miss Mason had only one idea of the outer evidences of the master-passion. A secret or unrequited affection which did not make itself known by copious quotations of Percy Shelley and Letitia Landon, was in her mind a very commonplace affair.

Mr. Monckton shrugged his shoulders.

"Who set you up as a judge of how a woman should speak of a man she loves?" he said sharply. "My wife has too much modesty to advertise her affection for any man. By-the-by, Miss Mason, would you like to come and live at Tolldale?"

Laura looked at her guardian with unmitigated surprise.

"Come and live at Tolldale!" she said; "I thought you didn't like me; I thought you despised me because I'm so frivolous and childish."

"Despise you, Laura," cried Gilbert Monckton, "not like you! My poor dear child, what a brute

I must have been if I ever have given you such an impression as that. I am very fond of you, my dear," he added, gravely, laying his hand upon the girl's head as he spoke, and looking down at her with sorrowful tenderness. "I am very much attached to you, my poor dear child. If I ever seem vexed with your girlish frivolity, it is only because I am anxious about your future. I am very, very anxious about your future."

"But why are you so anxious?"

"Because your mother was childish and light-hearted like you, Laura, and she was led to do a very cruel thing for want of thought."

"My poor mother. Ah, how I wish you would tell me about her."

Laura Mason looked very serious as she said this. Her hands were folded round the lawyer's arm, her bright blue eyes seemed to grow of a more sombre colour as she looked earnestly upward to his grave face.

"Not now, my dear; some day, some day, perhaps, we'll talk about all that. But not now. You haven't answered my question, Laura. Would you like to live at Tolldale?"

The young lady blushed crimson and dropped her eyelids.

"I should dearly like to live with Eleanor," she said. "But——"

"But what?"

"I don't think it would be quite right to leave Mrs. Darrell, would it? The money you pay her is of great use to her, you know; I have heard her say she could scarcely get on without it, especially now that Launcelot—now that Mr. Darrell has come home."

The blushes deepened as Laura Mason said this.

The lawyer watched those deepening blushes with considerable uneasiness. "She is in love with this dark-eyed young Apollo," he thought.

"You are very scrupulous about Mrs. Darrell and her convenience, Laura," he said. "I should have fancied you would have been delighted to live with your old friend and companion. You'll come to-morrow to spend the day with Eleanor, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes; if you please."

"I'll send the carriage for you, after it has taken me to Slough. Good-by."

Mr. Monckton rode slowly homewards. His interview with Laura had not been altogether agreeable to him. The girl's surprise at his mar-

riage with Eleanor had irritated and disturbed him. It seemed like a protest against the twenty years that divided his age from that of his young wife. There was something abnormal and exceptionable in the marriage, it seemed, then; and the people who had congratulated him and wished him well, were so many bland and conventional hypocrites, who no doubt laughed in their sleeves at his folly.

The lawyer rode back to Tolldale Priory with a moody and overclouded brow.

"That girl is in love with Launcelot Darrell," he thought. "She betrayed her secret in her childish transparence. The young man must be wonderfully attractive, since people fall in love with him in this manner. I don't like him; I don't believe in him; I should not like Laura to be his wife."

Yet in the next moment Mr. Monckton reflected that, after all, a marriage between his ward and Launcelot might not be altogether unadvisable. The young man was clever and gentlemanly. He came of a good stock, and had at least brilliant expectations. He might marry Laura and go to Italy, where he could devote a few years to the cultivation of his art.

"If the poor child is in love with him, and he returns her affection, it would be cruel to come between them with any prudential tyranny," thought Mr. Monckton. "The young man seems really anxious to achieve success as an artist, and if he is to do so he ought certainly to study abroad."

The lawyer's mind dwelt upon this latter point throughout the remainder of his ride, and when he crossed the stone-paved hall where the cavalier's boots and saddles hung in the glowing light that stole through the emblazoned windows, he had almost come to the determination that Laura Mason and Launcelot Darrell ought to be married forthwith. He found his wife sitting in one of the windows of the library, with her hands lying idle in her lap, and her eyes fixed upon the garden before her. She started as he entered the room, and looked up at him with a bright eagerness in her face.

"You have been to Hazlewood?" she said.

"Yes, I have just come from there."

"And you have seen—?"

She stopped suddenly. Launcelot Darrell's name had risen to her lips, but she checked herself before uttering it, lest she should betray her

eager interest in him. She had no fear of that interest being misconstrued; no idea of such a possibility had ever entered her head. She only feared that some chance look or word might betray her vengeful hatred of the young man.

"You saw Laura—and—and Mrs. Darrell, I suppose?" she said.

"Yes, I saw Laura and Mrs. Darrell," answered Gilbert Monckton, watching his wife's face. He had perceived the hesitation with which she had asked this question. He saw now that she was disappointed in his reply.

Eleanor was incapable of dissimulation, and her disappointment betrayed itself in her face. She had expected to hear something of Launcelot Darrell, something which would have at least given her an excuse for questioning her husband about him.

"You did not see Mr. Darrell, then?" she said, after a pause, during which Mr. Monckton had placed himself opposite to her in the open window. The afternoon sunshine fell full upon Eleanor's face; lighting up every change of expression; revealing every varying shade of thought that betrayed itself unconsciously in a

countenance whose mobility was one of its greatest charms.

"No, Mr. Darrell was in his painting-room; I did not see him."

There was a pause. Eleanor was silent, scarcely knowing how to fashion any question that might lead to her gaining some information about the man whose secrets she had set herself to unravel.

"Do you know, Eleanor," said the lawyer after this pause, during which he had kept close watch upon his wife's face, "I think I have discovered a secret that concerns Launcelot Darrell."

"A secret?"

Sudden blushes lit up Eleanor Monckton's cheeks like a flaming fire.

"A secret!" she repeated. "You have found out a secret!"

"Yes, I believe that my ward, Laura Mason, has fallen in love with the young man."

Eleanor's face changed. Her feverish eagerness gave place to a look of indifference.

"Is that all?" she said.

She had no very great belief in the intensity of Miss Mason's feelings. The girl's sentimental talk and demonstrative admiration had to her mind something spurious in their nature; Mrs.

Monckton was ready to love Laura very dearly when the business of her life should be done, and she could have time to love anybody, but in the meantime she gave herself no uneasiness about Miss Mason's romantic passion for the young painter.

"Laura is as inconstant as the wind," she thought. "She will hate Launcelot Darrell when I tell her how base he is."

But what was Eleanor's surprise when Mr. Monckton said, very quietly,

"If the girl is really attached to this young man, and he returns her affection—she is so pretty and fascinating, that I should think he could scarcely help being in love with her—I don't see why the match should not take place."

Eleanor looked up suddenly.

"Oh, no, no, no," she cried; "you would never let Laura marry Launcelot Darrell."

"And why not, Mrs. Monckton?"

The insidious imp which the lawyer had made his bosom companion of late, at this moment transformed itself into a raging demon, and gnawed ravenously at the vitals of its master.

"Why shouldn't Laura marry Launcelot Darrell?"

"Because you have a bad opinion of him. What did you say to me by the garden-gate at Hazlewood, when Mr. Darrell first came home? You said he was selfish, shallow, frivolous; false, perhaps. You said there was a seeret in his life."

"I thought so then."

"And have you ceased to think so now?"

"I don't know. I may have been prejudiced against the young man," answered Mr. Monckton, doubtfully.

"I don't think you were," Eleanor said; "I don't think he is a good man. Pray, pray don't let Laura marry him."

She clasped her hands in her eagerness, as she looked up in her husband's face.

Gilbert Monckton's brow darkened.

"What does it matter to you?" he asked.

Eleanor looked surprised at the almost angry abruptness of her husband's manner.

"It matters a great deal to me," she said. "I should be very sorry if Laura were to make an unhappy marriage."

"But must her marriage with Launcelot Darrell be necessarily unhappy?"

"Yes; because he is a bad man."

"What right have you to say that, unless you have some special reason for thinking it?"

"I have a special reason."

"What reason?"

"I cannot tell you—now."

The ravenous demon's tooth grew sharper than usual when Eleanor said this.

"Mrs. Monckton," the lawyer said, sternly, "I am afraid that there can be very little happiness in store for you and me if you begin your married life by keeping secrets from your husband."

Gilbert Monckton was too proud to say more than this. A dull despair was creeping into his breast, a sick loathing of himself and of his folly. Every one of those twenty years which made him his young wife's senior rose up against him, and gibed and twitted him.

What right had he to marry a young wife, and believe that she could love him? What justification could he find for his own folly in taking this girl from poverty and obscurity, and then expecting that she should feel any warmer sentiment than some feeble gratitude to him for having given her an advantageous bargain? He had given her a handsome house and attentive servants,

carriages and horses, prosperity and independence, in exchange for her bright youth and beauty, and he was angry with her because she did not love him.

Looking back at that interview in the Pilasters —every circumstance of which was very clear to him now, by the aid of a pair of spectacles lent him by the jealous demon his familiar — Mr. Monckton remembered that no confession of love had dropped from Eleanor's lips. She had consented to become his wife, nothing more. She had, no doubt—in those moments of maidenly hesitation, during which he had waited so breathlessly — deliberately weighed and carefully balanced the advantages that were to be won from the sacrifice demanded of her.

Of course the perpetual brooding upon such fancies as these very much tended to make Gilbert Monckton an agreeable and lively companion for an impulsive girl. There is something remarkable in the persistency with which the sufferer from that terrible disease called jealousy strives to aggravate the causes of his torture.

CHAPTER XI.

BY THE SUNDIAL.

LAURA MASON came to live at Tolldale. Gilbert Monckton argued with himself that his most reasonable motive for marrying Eleanor Vane had lain in his desire to provide a secure home and suitable companionship for his ward. The girl was very glad to be with Eleanor; but a little sorry to leave Hazlewood, now that Mr. Launcelot Darrell's presence gave a new charm to the place.

"Not that he is very lively, you know, Nelly," Miss Mason remarked to her guardian's wife in the course of a long discussion of Mr. Darrell's merits. "He never seems happy. He's always roaming about the place, looking as if he had something upon his mind. It makes him look very handsome, though, you know; I don't think he'd look half so handsome if he hadn't anything on his mind. He was awfully dull and gloomy after you went away, Nell; I'm sure he must have

been in love with you. Mrs. Darrell says he wasn't; and that he admires another person: quite a different person. Do you think I'm the person, Eleanor dear?" asked the young lady, blushing and smiling, as she looked shyly up at her companion's grave face.

"I don't know, Laura; but I almost hope not, for I should be very sorry if you were to marry Launcelot Darrell," Eleanor said.

"But why should you be sorry, Nelly?"

"Because I don't think he's a good man."

Miss Mason pouted her under lip and shrugged her shoulders, with the prettiest air of impatience.

"It's very unkind of you to say so, Nell," she exclaimed. "I'm sure he's good! Or if he isn't good, I like him all the better for it," she added, with charming inconsistency. "I don't want to marry a good man, like my guardian, or Mr. Neate, the curate of Hazlewood parish. The Corsair wasn't good; but see how fond Gulnare and Medora were of him. I don't suppose it was good of the Giaour to kill Hassan; but who could have had the heart to refuse to marry the Giaour?"

Mrs. Monckton did not attempt to argue with a young lady who expressed such opinions as these. Laura's romantic infatuation only made Eleanor

more impatient for the coming of that hour in which she should be able to denounce Launcelot Darrell as a cheat and a traitor.

"He shall be disappointed in his hope of a fortune, and through me," she thought. "He shall be cast off by the woman who has loved him, and through me. And when he suffers most, I will be as pitiless to his suffering, as he was pitiless to the old man whom he cheated and abandoned to despair."

A fortnight passed after Eleanor's arrival at the Priory before she had any opportunity of seeing Launcelot Darrell. She had proposed going to Hazlewood several times, but upon each occasion Mr. Monckton had contrived to interpose some objection to her visit. She began to despair of entering upon the silent struggle with her father's destroyer. It seemed as if she had come to Tolldale for no purpose. In her impatience she dreaded that Maurice de Crespigny would die, leaving his fortune to his nephew. She knew that the old man's life hung by a slender thread, which at any moment might be severed.

But at last the opportunity she had so anxiously awaited arrived unexpectedly, not brought about by any scheming or foresight upon her part.

Laura had been a few days at the Priory, and the two girls were walking in one of the sheltered pathways of the old-fashioned garden, waiting for Gilbert Monckton's arrival, and the clanging summons of the great dinner-bell.

The October sunshine was bright and pleasant, the autumn flowers enlivened the dark luxuriance of the garden with their gaudy splendour. The tall hollyhocks waved in the breeze.

The two girls had walked up and down the smooth gravel path for some time in silence. Eleanor was absorbed in her own thoughts, and even Laura could not talk for ever without encouragement.

But presently this latter young lady stopped with a blush and a start, clasping her hand tightly about her companion's wrist. At the other end of the sheltered walk amongst the flickering patches of sunshine that trembled on the filbert-trees, she had perceived Launcelot Darrell advancing towards them.

Eleanor looked up.

"What is the matter, Laura?" she asked.

In the next moment she recognised Mr. Darrell. The chance had come at last.

The young man advanced to meet Mrs. Monck-

ton and her companion. He was pale, and had a certain gravity in his face expressive of some hidden sorrow. He had been in love with Eleanor Vane, after his own fashion, and was very much disposed to resent her desertion of him. His mother had told him the reason of that desertion very frankly, after Eleanor's marriage.

"I come to offer you my congratulations, Mrs. Monckton," he said, in a tone which was intended to wound the young wife to the quick, but which, like everything else about this young man, had a certain spuriousness, an air of melodrama that robbed it of all force. "I should have accompanied my mother when she called on you the other day—but—"

He paused abruptly, looking at Laura with an air of ill-concealed vexation.

"Can I speak to you alone, Mrs. Monckton?" he asked; "I have something particular to say to you."

"But you can say it before Laura, I suppose?"

"No, not before Laura, or before any one. I must speak to you alone."

Miss Mason looked at the object of her admiration with a piteous expression in her childish face.

"How cruel he is to me," she thought; "I do believe he is in love with Eleanor. How wicked of him to be in love with my guardian's wife.

Mrs. Monckton did not attempt to refuse the privilege which the young man demanded of her.

"I am quite willing to hear anything you may have to say to me," she said.

"Oh, very well!" cried Laura. "I'm sure I'll go away if you want to talk about secrets that I musn't hear. Only I don't see how you can have any secrets. You haven't known Mr. Darrell a day longer than I have, Eleanor, and I can't imagine what he can have to say to you."

After this protest Miss Mason turned her back upon her companions, and ran away towards the house. She shed a few silent tears behind the shelter of a great clump of chrysanthemums.

"He doesn't care for me a bit," she muttered, as she dried her eyes; "Mrs. Darrell is a wicked old storyteller. I feel just as poor Gulnare must have felt when the Corsair was so rude to her, after she'd committed a murder for his sake."

Eleanor and Launcelot left the sheltered pathway, and walked slowly across the broad lawn towards an old sundial, quaint in shape, and

covered with the moss that had slowly crept over the grey stonework. Here the young man stopped, lounging against the moss-grown pedestal, and resting his elbow upon the broken dial.

"I have come here to-day to tell you that you have treated me very ill, Eleanor Monckton," he said.

The young wife drew herself up proudly.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"I mean that you jilted me."

"Jilted you!"

"Yes. You played fast and loose with me. You listened to my declaration of love. You suffered me to believe that you loved me."

"Mr. Darrell!"

"You did more, Eleanor," cried the young man, passionately; "you *did* love me. This marriage with Gilbert Monckton, a man twenty years your senior, is a marriage prompted by base and mercenary motives. You loved me, Eleanor; your silence admitted it that day, if your words did not. You had no right to be cajoled by my mother; you had no right to leave Hazlewood without a word of explanation to me. You are falsehearted and mercenary, Mrs. Monckton; and you have married this man here because he is the

owner of a fine house, and can give you money to spend upon your womanly caprices—your selfish vanities."

He pointed scornfully to her silk dress as he spoke, and to the golden trinkets that glittered at her waist.

She looked at him with a strange expression in her face.

"Think of me as you please," she said; "think that I was in love with you, if you like."

It was as if she had said to him, "Fall into a trap of your own setting, if you please. I am not base enough to lay such a snare for you."

"Yes, Eleanor, you were false and mercenary. You were foolish, perhaps, as well; for I may be a rich man before very long. I may be master of the Woodlands property."

"I don't think you ever will inherit that fortune," Eleanor said slowly. "You talk of my being base and mercenary; you are at liberty to think so if you please. But have *you* never done base things for the sake of money, Launcelot Darrell?"

The man's face darkened.

"Nobody is immaculate, I dare say," he answered. "I have been very poor, and have been

obliged to do what the rest of the world does when its purse is empty."

As Eleanor watched his moody face she suddenly remembered that this was not the way her cards must be played. The task which she had set herself to perform was not to be accomplished by candour and openness. This man had betrayed her father, and she must betray him.

She held out her hand to Launcelot Darrell.

"Let us be friends," she said; "I wish to be friends with you."

There were two witnesses looking on at this gesture. Laura Mason was standing by her guardian, watching the group beside the sundial. Gilbert Monckton had returned from town, and had come into the garden in search of his wife.

"They sent me away from them," Laura said, as her guardian looked at Launcelot and Eleanor. "He had something particular to say to her; so I wasn't to hear it, and they sent me away. You'll ask him to dinner, I suppose?"

"No," answered the lawyer, sharply.

Launcelot Darrell held Eleanor's hand some moments before he released it.

"I wish to be friends with you, Mr. Darrell," she said; "I'll come to Hazlewood to-morrow to

see your pictures, if you please. I want to see how the Rosalind and Celia goes on."

She hated herself for her hypocrisy. Every generous impulse of her soul revolted against her falsehood. But these things were only a natural part of the unnatural task which she had set herself to perform.

CHAPTER XII.

KEEPING WATCH.

Two pair of jealous eyes kept constant watch upon Eleanor Monckton, for some time after that October afternoon on which the lawyer and Miss Mason had stood side by side, looking at the two figures by the sundial.

Gilbert Monckton was too proud to complain. He laid down the fair hopes of his manhood in the grave that already held the broken dreams of his youth. He bowed his head, and resigned himself to his fate.

"I was mistaken," he thought; "it was too preposterous to suppose that at forty I could win the love of a girl of eighteen. My wife is good and true, but—"

But what? Could this girl be good and true? Had she not deceived her lover most cruelly, most deliberately, in her declaration of utter indifference towards Launcelot Darrell?

Mr. Monckton remembered her very words, her sudden look of astonishment, her almost shuddering gesture of surprise, as he asked the important question—

"And you do not love Launcelot Darrell?"

"Love him! oh, no, no, no!"

And in spite of this emphatic denial, Mrs. Monckton had, ever since her arrival at Tolldale Priory, betrayed an intense, an almost feverish interest in the young scapegrace artist.

"If she is capable of falsehood," thought the lawyer, "there must surely be no truth upon this earth. Shall I trust her, and wait patiently for the solution of the mystery? No; between man and wife there should be no mystery! She has no right to keep any secret from me."

So Mr. Monckton hardened his heart against his beautiful young wife, and set himself sternly and indefatigably to watch her every look, to listen to every intonation of her voice, to keep a rigorous guard over his own honour and dignity.

Poor Eleanor was too innocent to read all these signs aright; she only thought that her husband was changed; that this stern and gloomy companion was not the same Gilbert Monckton whom she had known at Hazlewood;

not the patient "guide, philosopher, and friend," whose subdued bass voice, eloquent in the dusky evenings, long ago—a year is very long to a girl of eighteen—in Mrs. Darrell's simple drawing-room, had seemed a kind of intellectual music to her.

Had she not been absorbed always by that one thought, whose intensity had reduced the compass of her mind to a monotone, the young wife would have very bitterly felt this change in her husband. As it was, she looked upon her disappointment as something very far away from her; something to be considered and regretted by-and-by :b y-and-by, when the grand business of her life was done.

But while the gulf between the young wife and her husband every day grew wider, this grand business made no progress. Day after day, week after week, passed by; and Eleanor Monckton found herself no nearer the end.

She had paid several visits to Hazlewood; she had acted her part to the best of her abilities, which were very mediocre in all matters where deception is necessary; she had watched and questioned Launcelot Darrell; but she had obtained no vestige of proof to set before Maurice

de Crespigny when she denounced his niece's son.

No; whatever secrets were hidden in the young man's breast, he was so guarded as to baffle Eleanor Monckton at every point. He was so thoroughly self-possessed as to avoid betraying himself by so much as a look or a tone.

He was, however, thrown a good deal in Eleanor's society; for Mr. Monckton, with a strange persistence, encouraged the penniless artist's attentions to Laura Mason: while Launcelot Darrell, too shallow to hold long to any infatuation, influenced upon one side by his mother, and flattered upon the other by Laura's unconcealed admiration, was content, by-and-by, to lay down his allegiance at this new shrine, and to forgive Mrs. Monckton for her desertion.

"Eleanor and my mother were both right, I dare say," the young man reflected, contemplating his fate with a feeling of despondent languor. "They were wiser than I was, I dare say. I ought to marry a rich woman. I could never drag out an existence of poverty. Bachelor poverty is bad enough, but, at least, there's something artistic and Bohemian about that.

Chambertin one day, and vin ordinaire the next; Veuve Cliquot at the Trois Frères or the Café de Paris to-night, and small beer in a garret to-morrow morning. But married poverty! Squalid desolation, instead of reckless gaiety; a sick wife and lean hungry children, and the husband carrying wet canvases to the pawnbroker! Bah! Eleanor was right; she has done a good thing for herself; and I'd better go in and win the heiress, and make myself secure against any caprice of my worthy great-uncle."

It was thus that Launcelot Darrell became a frequent visitor at Tolldale Priory, and as, at about this time, Mr. Monckton's business became so unimportant as to be easily flung entirely into the hands of the two junior partners, the lawyer was almost always at home to receive his guest.

Nothing could have been more antagonistic than the characters of the two men. There was no possibility of sympathy or assimilation between them. The weakness of one was rendered more evident by the strength of the other. The decided character of the lawyer seemed harsh and rigid when contrasted with the easy-going, languid good-nature of the artist.

Eleanor Monckton, perceiving this wide difference between the two men, admired her husband as much as she despised Launcelot Darrell.

If the lawyer could have known this,—if he could have known that when his wife's earnest eyes followed every change of expression in the young man's face, when she listened most intently to his careless and rambling, yet sometimes almost brilliant talk, she read his shallow nature and its worthlessness better than that nature had ever yet been read by the closest observer,—if Gilbert Monckton could have understood these things, what wasted agonies, what futile tortures, might have been spared him!

"What would have become of me if I had loved this man?" Eleanor thought, as day by day, with an intellect rendered preternaturally clear by the intensity of her one desire, she grew more familiar with Launcelot Darrell's character.

In the meanwhile, Laura Mason walked along a pathway of roses, whose only thorns were those jealous twinges which the young lady experienced on account of Eleanor Monckton.

"He loved her first," the heiress thought despondently, "I know he did, and he made her an offer upon the day the dressmaker brought

home my blue silk, and it was so short-waisted I was obliged to make her take it back for alteration. And that was why she—I mean Eleanor, not the dressmaker—left Hazlewood. And it's not pleasant to think that the man one idolises has idolised somebody else not three months before he proposes to one; and I don't think it was right of Eleanor to lead him on."

It was by this latter very vague phrase that Miss Mason was in the habit of excusing her lover's delinquency. Eleanor had led him on; and he was thereby in a manner justified for that brief infatuation which had beguiled him from poor Laura. In what this "leading on" had consisted the young lady did not seek to understand. She wanted to forgive her lover, and she wanted reasons for her forgiveness; as weak women do when they deliver themselves up to the bondage of a sentimental affection for a handsome face. But although Launcelot Darrell had made his peace with Mr. Monckton's ward, wooing her with a great many tender words and pretty stereotyped phrases under the gloomy shadow of the yew-trees in the old-fashioned priory garden, and although he had formally demanded her hand, and had been accepted by

her guardian and herself, Laura was not yet quite satisfied. Some lingering sentiment of distrust still held its place in her breast, and the jealous twinges, which, as I have said, constituted the thorns upon her rose-bestrewn pathway, were very sharp and numerous.

Nor was Mr. Monckton wholly free from anxiety on his ward's account. He had consented to her engagement with Launcelot Darrell. He had done even more; he had encouraged the young man's suit; and now that it was too late to undo his work, he began to argue with himself as to the wisdom of his conduct.

He tried to palter with his conscience; but he could not disguise from himself that the leading motive which had induced him to consent to his ward's engagement was his desire to remove Launcelot Darrell out of the society of his wife. He could not be so blind to his own weakness as to be unaware of the secret pleasure he felt in being able to demonstrate to Eleanor the worthlessness of an affection which could be so easily transferred from one object to another.

Apart from this, Gilbert Monckton tried to believe that he had taken the best course within his power of choice, for the frivolous girl whom

it was his duty to protect. To have opposed Laura's attachment would have been to cause her great unhappiness. The young man was clever and agreeable. He was the descendant of a race which was almost noble by right of its origin. His character would grow stronger with time, and it would be the guardian's duty to foster all that was good in the nature of his ward's husband; and to put him in a fair way of occupying an honourable position.

"I will try and develope his talent—his genius, perhaps," Gilbert Monckton thought; "he shall go to Italy, and study the old masters."

So it was settled that the marriage should take place early in the spring, and that Launcelot and his wife should start immediately afterwards upon a tour through the great art cities of the continent. It was arranged that they should remain away for at least a twelvemonth, and that they should spend the winter in Rome.

Eleanor Monckton grew deathly pale when her husband announced to her the probable date of the marriage.

"So soon!" she said, in a low, half-stifled voice. "So soon! why December has already begun—the spring will be here directly."

Gilbert Monckton watched her face with a thoughtful frown.

"What is there to wait for?" he said.

Eleanor was silent for a few moments. What could she say? Could she suffer this engagement to continue? Could she allow Launcelot Darrell to hold his place amongst these people who so ignorantly trusted in him? She would have spoken, perhaps, and confided at least some part of her secret to her husband, but she refrained from doing so: for might not he too laugh at her, as Richard Thornton had done? Might not he, who had grown lately cold and reserved in his manner towards her, sometimes even sarcastic and severe—might not he sternly reprobate her mad desire for vengeance, and in some manner or other frustrate the great purpose of her life?

She had trusted Richard Thornton, and had implored his help. No good had ever come of that confidence: nothing but remonstrances, reproaches, entreaties; even ridicule. Why, then, should she trust any one else? No, she was resolved henceforward to hold her secret in her own keeping, and to look to herself alone for victory.

"Why should the marriage be delayed?" Mr. Monckton demanded, rather sharply, for the second time, "is there any reason for delay?"

"No," Eleanor faltered, "not if you think Mr. Darrell worthy of Laura's confidence; not if you think him a good man?"

"Have you any reason to think otherwise of him?"

Mrs. Monckton evaded a direct answer to this question.

"It was you who first taught me to doubt him," she said.

"Indeed!" answered her husband; "I had quite forgotten that. I wonder, Eleanor, that you should appear so much interested in this young man, since you have so bad an opinion of him."

Mr. Monckton left the room after launching this dart at the breast which he believed was guilty of hiding from him a secret regard for another.

"God help her, poor child!" thought the lawyer, "she married me for my position; and perhaps thought that it would be an easy thing to conquer some slight sentimental predilection for Launcelot Darrell. She tries to do her duty, I

believe; and when this young man is safely out of the way she may learn to love me perhaps."

Such reflections as these were generally followed by a change in the lawyer's manner, and Eleanor's failing spirits revived in the new sunshine of his affection. She had respected and admired Gilbert Monckton from the hour of her meeting with him at the Great Western terminus; and she was ready to love him truly and cordially whenever she could succeed in her great purpose, and disengage her mind from its one absorbing idea.

CHAPTER XIII.

AN OLD MAN'S FANCY.

ALTHOUGH Eleanor Monckton's utmost watchfulness revealed to her nothing that could be twisted into a proof of Launcelot Darrell's identity with the man who had been the indirect cause of her father's death, she made some progress in another quarter, very much to the annoyance of several people, amongst whom must be included the young painter.

Maurice de Crespigny, who for some years past had not been known to take an interest in anything, exhibited a very great interest in Gilbert Monckton's young wife.

The old man had never forgotten the day upon which he had been suddenly carried back to the past, by the apparition of a fair-haired girl who seemed to him the living image of his lost friend. He had never forgotten this; and when, a few days after Eleanor's arrival at Tolldale,

he happened to encounter her in one of his airings, he had insisted on stopping to talk to her, much to the aggravation of his two maiden warders.

Eleanor caught eagerly at any chance of becoming familiar with her father's friend. It was to him she looked for her promised vengeance. The law could give her no redress; but Maurice de Crespigny held in his hand the disposition of that wealth for which his young kinsman hoped, and thus possessed power to punish the cheat and traitor who had robbed a helpless old man.

Even if this motive had not existed, Eleanor's love for her dead father would have been sufficient to inspire her with every tender feeling towards the owner of Woodlands. Her manner, modified by this tenderness, acted almost like a spell upon Maurice de Crespigny. He insisted upon coming, in the course of his daily airing, to that part of the grounds where the two estates were only divided by a slender wire fence, and where he might hope to meet Eleanor. By-and-by he extorted from her the promise to meet him on every fine day at a particular hour, and it was in vain that the maiden sisters endeavoured

by every stratagem they could devise, to detain him in-doors at this appointed time. They were fain to pray for perpetual wet weather, for storms and fogs, whirlwinds, and other caprices of nature, which might keep the invalid a prisoner to the house.

But at last even rain and tempest ceased to be of any avail to these distressed and expectant spinsters, for Maurice de Crespigny insisted upon inviting Mr. and Mrs. Monckton to Woodlands. They were to come whenever they could, every day if they could, the old man wrote, with a tremulous hand that was apt to go a little astray over the paper; but which was yet strong enough and firm enough to inscribe a decent signature at the foot of a Will.

The two sisters never saw him write without thinking of this document. Was it made, and made in their favour? Was it yet to make? Or was it made in accordance with the expectations of Ellen Darrell and her son?

Lavinia and Sarah de Crespigny were agonised by the mere thought of this latter possibility. It was not the money alone that they thought of, the lands and tenements alone that they considered. There was the family house in which

they had lived so long, the household treasures which their own careful hands had dusted, as things too sacred to be approached by meaner fingers.

There were the old silver salvers, the antique tea and coffee services, the great dragon-china jars on the staircase, the inlaid card-tables in the green parlour,—would the ruthless young man come into possession, and seize even upon those particular household gods which were most sacred to the maiden sisters?

They knew that they had no claim to any great mercy from Launcelot Darrell. Had they not urged his Indian voyage, and for ever offended him by so doing? It would have been better perhaps to have been friendly towards him, and to have suffered him to remain in England, and to be as much at Woodlands as he pleased, thereby affording him ample opportunity for giving offence to his great-uncle.

"Who can count upon an old man's caprices," thought the maiden sisters; "perhaps because our uncle has seen very little of Launcelot, he may be all the more kindly disposed towards him."

On the other hand there was now the more

imminent danger of this sudden fancy with which Eleanor Monckton had inspired the invalid; and the sisters grew paler and more lugubrious every day as they watched the progress of this eccentric friendship.

Gilbert Monckton placed no obstacle in the way of his wife's visits to Woodlands. He knew how sternly the doors of Mr. de Crespigny's house were guarded against his widowed niece and her son; and he knew that there at least Eleanor was not likely to meet Launcelot Darrell.

Mrs. Monckton was therefore free to visit her dead father's friend when she pleased; and she was not slow to avail herself of this privilege. It was of vital importance to her to be on familiar terms with Maurice de Crespigny, to be able to enter his house when and how she would. She saw enough in the old man's face, in the fearful uncertainty of his health—which one day suffered him to be bright and cheerful, and on the next laid him prostrate and helpless upon a sick bed—to convince her that his state was terribly precarious. He might linger for years. He might die suddenly. He might die leaving his fortune to Launcelot Darrell.

The sisters watched, with ever-increasing alarm,

the progress that Mrs. Monckton was making in their uncle's favour. The old man seemed to brighten under the influence of Eleanor's society. He had no glimmering idea of the truth; he fully believed that the likeness which the lawyer's young wife bore to George Vane was one of those accidental resemblances so common to the experience of every one. He believed this; and yet in spite of this he felt as if Eleanor's presence brought back something of his lost youth. Even his memory was revivified by the companionship of his dead friend's daughter; and he would sit for hours together, talking, as his nieces had not heard him talk in many monotonous years; telling familiar stories of that past in which George Vane had figured so prominently.

To Eleanor these old memories were never wearisome; and Maurice de Crespigny felt the delight of talking to a listener who was really interested. He was accustomed to the polite attention of his nieces, whose suppressed yawns sometimes broke in unpleasantly at the very climax of a story, and whose wooden-faced stolidity had at best something unpleasantly suggestive of being listened to and stared at by two

Dutch clocks. But he was not accustomed to see a beautiful and earnest face turned towards him as he spoke; a pair of bright grey eyes lighting up with new radiance at every crisis in the narrative; and lovely lips half parted through intensity of interest.

These things the old man was not accustomed to, and he became entirely Eleanor's slave and adorer. Indeed, the elderly damsels congratulated themselves upon Miss Vincent's marriage with Gilbert Monckton; otherwise Maurice de Crespigny being besotted and infatuated, and the young woman mercenary, there might have been a new mistress brought home to Woodlands instead of to Tolldale Priory.

Happily for Eleanor the anxious minds of the maiden sisters were ultimately set in some degree at rest by a few words which Maurice de Crespigny let drop in a conversation with Mrs. Monckton. Amongst the treasures possessed by the old man—the relics of a past life, whose chief value lay in association—there was one object that was peculiarly precious to Eleanor. This was a miniature portrait of George Vane, in the cap and gown which he had worn sixty years before, at Magdalen College, Oxford.

This picture was very dear to Eleanor Monckton. It was no very wonderful work of art, perhaps, but a laborious and patient performance, whose production had cost more time and money than the photographic representations of half the members of the Lower House would cost to-day. It showed Eleanor a fair-haired stripling with bright hopeful blue eyes. It was the shadow of her dead father's youth.

Her eyes filled with tears as she looked at the little ivory portrait in its oval case of slippery red morocco.

"Crocodile!" thought one of the maiden sisters.

"Sycophant!" muttered the other.

But this very miniature gave rise to that speech which had so much effect in calming the terrors of the two ladies.

"Yes, my dear," Maurice de Crespigny said; "that portrait was painted sixty years ago. George Vane would have been close upon eighty if he had lived. Yes, close upon eighty, my love. You don't see your own likeness to that picture, perhaps; people seldom do see resemblances of that kind. But the lad's face is like yours, my dear, and you bring back the memory of my

youth, just as the scent of some old-fashioned flower, that our advanced horticulture has banished to a cottager's garden, brings back the grass-plot upon which I played at my mother's knees. Do you know what I mean to do, Mrs. Monckton?"

Eleanor lifted her eyebrows with an arch smile, as who should say, "Your caprices are quite beyond my power of divination."

"I mean to leave that miniature to you in my Will, my dear."

The maiden sisters started simultaneously, agitated by the same emotion, and their eyes met.

"Yes, my dear," Maurice de Crespigny repeated, "I shall leave that miniature to you when I die. It's not worth anything intrinsically; but I don't want you to be reminded of me when I am dead and gone, except through your own tender feelings. You have been interested in my stories of George Vane—who, with all his faults, and I'm not slow to acknowledge them, was a brighter and a better man than I was—and it may please you sometimes to look at that picture. You've brought a ray of sunlight across a very dismal pathway, my love," added the invalid,

quite indifferent to the fact that this remark was by no means complimentary to his devoted nurses and guardians, "and I am grateful to you. If you were poor, I should leave you money. But you are the wife of a rich man; and, beyond that, my fortune is already disposed of. I am not free to leave it as I might wish; I have a duty to perform, my dear; a duty which I consider sacred and imperative; and I shall fulfil that duty."

The old man had never before spoken so freely of his intentions with regard to his money. The sisters sat staring blankly at each other, with quickened breaths and pale faces.

What could this speech mean? Why, clearly that the money must be left to them. What other duty could Maurice de Crespigny owe to any one? Had they not kept guard over him for years, shutting him in, and separating him from every living creature? What right had he to be grateful to any one but them, inasmuch as they had taken good care that no one else should ever do him a service?

But to the ears of Eleanor Monckton, the old man's speech had another signification; the blood mounted to her face, and her heart beat

violently. "He is thinking of Launcelot Darrell," she thought; "he will leave his fortune to Launcelot Darrell. He will die before he learns the secret of my father's wrongs. His Will is already made, no doubt, and he will die before I can dare to say to him, 'Your niece's son is a trickster and a villain!'"

This was the only occasion upon which Maurice de Crespigny ever spoke of his intentions with regard to the fortune that he must leave behind him. He said, plainly enough, that Eleanor was to have none of his money; and the sisters, who had until now kept a jealous watch upon the old man and his favourite, were henceforward content to let Mrs. Monckton come and go as she pleased. But for all this Eleanor was no nearer the accomplishment of her great purpose.

Launcelot Darrell came to Tolldale, and in a certain easy and somewhat indifferent manner paid his homage to his affianced wife. Laura was happy by fits and starts; and by fits and starts utterly miserable, when the horrible pangs of jealousy—jealousy of Eleanor, and jealous doubts of her lover's truth—tortured her breast. Gilbert Monckton sat day after day in the library or the drawing-room, or Eleanor's morning-room,

as the case might be, keeping watch over his wife and the lovers.

But though the days and weeks went by with an unnatural rapidity, as it seemed to Mrs. Monckton, with a wearisome slowness in the opinion of her husband—the progress of time brought George Vane's daughter no further onward, by so much as one step, upon the pathway which she had chosen for herself.

Christmas came; and the girl whose youth had been spent in the shabby lodgings in which her father had hidden the poverty of his decline, the patient young housekeeper who had been used to eke out ounces of tea, and to entreat for brief respite and grace from aggrieved chandlers, was called upon to play my Lady Bountiful at Tolldale Priory, and to dole out beef and bread, blankets and brandy, coals and flannels, to a host of hungry and shivering claimants.

Christmas passed, and the new year struggled into life under every disadvantage of bad weather; while the spring, the dreaded early spring, which was to witness Laura's marriage, approached with a stealthy footfall, creeping day by day nearer and nearer.

Eleanor, in very despair, appealed to Richard Thornton.

She appealed to him from the force of habit, perhaps: as a fretful child complains to its mother: rather than from any hope that he could aid her in her great scheme.

"Oh, Richard," she wrote, despairingly, "help me, help me, help me! I thought all would be so easy if I could once come to this place. But I am here, and I see Launcelot Darrell every day, and yet I am no nearer the end. What am I to do? January is nearly over; and in March, Laura Mason is to marry that man. Mr. de Crespigny is very ill, and may die at any moment, leaving his money to his niece's son. Is this man, who caused my father's death, to have all the brightest and best things this world can give? Is he to have a noble fortune and an amiable wife? and am I to stand by and permit him to be happy; remembering what happened upon that dreadful night in Paris—remembering that my father lies in his unconsecrated grave, and that his blood is upon this man's head? Help me, Richard. Come to me; help me to find proof positive of Launcelot Darrell's guilt. You can help me, if you please. Your brain is

clearer, your perception quicker, than mine. I am carried away by my own passion—blinded by my indignation. You were right when you said I should never succeed in this work. I look to you to avenge my father's death."

CHAPTER XIV.

A POWERFUL ALLY.

Richard Thornton was not slow to respond to Eleanor's summons. The same post which carried Mrs. Monckton's letter to the young man, conveyed another letter, addressed to the Signora, urging her to abandon her pupils, for a time at least, and to come at once to Tolldale.

Eleanor had not forgotten the faithful friends who had succoured her in the day of her desolation, but the Signora's habits of independence were not to be conquered, and Mrs. Monckton found there was very little that Eliza Picirillo would consent to accept from her.

She had insisted upon removing the music-mistress from the eccentric regions of the Pilasters to a comfortable first-floor in Dudley Street. She had furnished this new shelter with easy chairs, and Brussels carpets, an Erard's piano,

and proof impressions of the Signora's favourite pictures; and in doing this she had very nearly exhausted her first year's income, much to the satisfaction of Gilbert Monckton, who implored her to call upon him freely for any money she might want for her friends.

It pleased him to see her do these things. It was a delight to him to see her thus tenderly grateful to the friends of her adversity.

"A mercenary woman would have cast off these humble associations," he thought: "this girl must be the noble creature I believed her to be, when I flung down my happiness for the second time at a woman's feet."

But although Eleanor would have gladly lavished every shilling she possessed upon Eliza Picirillo and her nephew, she could not persuade either the music-mistress or the scene-painter to work less hard than it had been their wont to do for many wearisome years. The Signora still went from house to house in attendance upon her out-of-door pupils, and still received young ladies bent upon wearing the laurel crown of the lyric drama. Richard still painted snow-clad mountain-tops, and impossible Alpine passes, impracticably prosperous villages, and

wide-spreading farm-lands of yellow corn, bounded by fragile white palings, and occupied by husbandmen in linen gaiters and chintz waistcoats. It was in vain, therefore, that Mrs. Monckton had hitherto implored her friends to come to Tolldale, and it was only in consequence of a very serious misunderstanding with Messrs. Spavin and Cromshaw, which for a time threw the scene-painter out of employment, that Richard Thornton was able to respond to Eleanor's earnest appeal.

A January that had been bleaker and colder than even January is expected to be, was drawing to a close, when Signora Picirillo and her nephew arrived at the Priory. The woods round Tolldale were shrouded with snow, the broad lawns before Woodlands were as white as Richard's Alpine passes, and Maurice de Crespigny had been for many weeks a prisoner to the house. Laura's wedding-day was appointed for the fifteenth of March, and that young lady, when unoccupied by her lover's society, was entirely absorbed in the millinery and mantua-making necessary for the preparation of her bridal outfit.

Richard Thornton had considerably modified the eccentric fashion of his beard, and had

bought a new suit of clothes in honour of his fair young hostess. The scene-painter had not seen Eleanor since the morning on which he had fled away from the Pilasters to hide his sorrows amongst the swamps of Battersea. The meeting, therefore, was a painful one to him; all the more painful, perhaps, because Mrs. Monckton received him with the frankly affectionate welcome which she would have bestowed upon a brother.

"You must help me, Dick," she said, "for the sake of others, if not for my sake; you cannot now refuse to fathom this mystery. If Launcelot Darrell is the man I believe him to be, he is no fit husband for an affectionate and trusting girl. He has no right to inherit Maurice de Crespigny's fortune! The marriage between Laura and this man is to take place upon the fifteenth of March. Maurice de Crespigny may die to-morrow. We have very little time before us, Richard."

So Mr. Thornton was fain to obey the imperious young lady, who had been in the habit of ordering him about, ever since the days in which he had kept rabbits and silkworms, for her gratification. He set himself to his task very

faithfully; and did his best to become acquainted with Launcelot Darrell's character.

The well-born young artist, who meant to do something very great in the Academy, at his earliest convenience, treated the scene-painter with a supercilious good-nature that was by no means agreeable to Mr. Thornton.

Dick had resolved *not* to be prejudiced against Eleanor's fancied enemy, lest that young lady's vehement impulses should have led her into rather an awkward mistake; but there was something in the insolent assurance of Launcelot Darrell that aroused Richard's indignation, and it was not without an effort that he contrived to be commonly civil to poor Laura's affianced husband.

Launcelot dined at Tolldale upon the evening of the arrival of Eleanor's guests, and it was at the dinner-table that Richard first had an opportunity of observing the man he had been entreated to watch. Mr. Monckton, sitting at the bottom of the table, and looking at his wife athwart a glittering array of glass and silver, became aware of a change in Eleanor's manner. A change that mystified and bewildered him, but which was not altogether unpleasant to him.

The lawyer's jealousy had been chiefly aroused by the perpetual uneasiness of Eleanor's manner when Launcelot Darrell was present; by the furtive, yet unguarded watch which she kept upon the young man's movements. To-night, for the first time, her manner had changed. It was no longer Launcelot Darrell, but Richard Thornton whom she watched.

Following every varying expression of her face, Gilbert Monckton saw that she looked at the scene-painter with an earnest, questioning, appealing glance, that seemed to demand something of him, or urge him on to the performance of something that she wanted done. Looking from his wife to Richard, the lawyer saw that Launcelot Darrell was still watched; but this time the eyes that observed him were those of the Signora's nephew.

Mr. Monckton felt very much like a spectator, who looks on at a drama which is being acted in a language that is unknown to him. The *dramatis personæ* come in and go out; they are earnest or vehement, joyous or sorrowful, as the case may be; but not having any clue to the plot, the wretched looker-on can scarcely feel intense delight in the performance.

Eleanor contrived to question her ally in the course of the evening.

"Well, Richard," she said, "is Launcelot Darrell the man who cheated my father?"

"I don't know about that, Mrs. Monckton, but—"

"But you think—?"

"I think he is by no means the most delightful, or the best of men. He snubs me because I paint scenery for the Phœnix; and he accepts that silly little girl's homage with the air of a sultan."

"Then you don't like him, Dick!"

Mr. Thornton drew a long breath, as if by some powerful effort of his will he repressed a vehement and unseemly expression of feeling.

"I think he's—you know what a great tragedian used to call people when they rang down the act-drop three minutes before Lear had finished using bad language to his eldest daughter, or came up in the witches' cauldron with their backs to the audience—and nervous people have been known to do that, Eleanor:—it isn't pleasant to stand on a rickety ladder and talk to a quick-tempered tragedian out of a canvas saucepan, with the smell of burning rosin

in your nostrils, and another nervous apparition wanting to get you off the ladder before you've finished your speech. I think Launcelot Darrell is—a BEAST, Mrs. Monckton; and I have no doubt he would cheat at cards, if he had the chance of doing it with perfect safety and convenience."

"You think that?" cried Eleanor, seizing upon this latter part of Richard's speech; "you think that he would cheat a helpless old man. Prove that, Richard; prove it, and I will be as merciless to Launcelot Darrell as he was to my father—his uncle's friend, too; he knew that."

"Eleanor Monckton," Richard said, earnestly, "I have never been serious before upon this matter; I have hoped that you would outlive your girlish resolution; I hoped above all that when you married—" his voice trembled a little here, but he went bravely on—"new duties would make you forget that old promise; and I did my best, Heaven knows, to wean you from the infatuation. But now that I have seen this man, Launcelot Darrell, it seems to me as if there may have been something of inspiration in your sudden recognition of him. I have already seen enough of him to know at least that he is

no fit husband for that poor little romantic girl with the primrose-coloured ringlets; and I will do my best to find out where he was, and what he was doing, during those years in which he is supposed to have been in India."

"You will do this, Richard?"

"Yes, Mrs. Monckton." The young man addressed his old companion by this name, using the unfamiliar appellation as a species of rod by which he kept in order and subdued certain rebellious emotions that would arise as he remembered how utterly the beautiful girl, whose presence had made sunshine in the shabbiest, if not the shadiest of places, was now lost to him. "Yes, Mrs. Monckton, I will try and fathom the mystery. This Launcelot Darrell must be very clever if he can have contrived to do away with every vestige of the years in which he was or was not in India. However softly Time may tread, he leaves his footmarks behind him; and it will be strange if we can't find some tell-tale impression whereby Mr. Darrell's secret may be discovered. By-the-by, Mrs. Monckton, you have had a good deal of time for observation. What have you done towards investigating the young man's antecedents?"

Eleanor blushed, and hesitated a little before she answered this very direct question.

"I have watched him very closely," she said, "and I've listened to every word he has ever said—"

"To be sure. In the expectation, no doubt, that he would betray himself by frowns and scowls, and other facial contortions, after the manner of a stage villain; or that he would say, 'At such a time I was in Paris;' or, 'At such a time I cheated at *écarté*.' You go cleverly to work, Mrs. Monckton, for an amateur detective!"

"What ought I to have done, then?" Eleanor asked despondently.

"You should have endeavoured to trace up the history of the past by those evidences which the progress of life can scarcely fail to leave behind it. Watch the man's habits and associations, rather than the man himself. Have you had access to the rooms in which he lives?"

"Yes; I have been with Laura to Hazlewood often since I came here. I have been in Launcelot Darrell's rooms."

"And have you seen nothing there? no book, no letter; no scrap of evidence that might make one link in the story of this man's life?"

"Nothing—nothing particular. He has some French novels on a shelf in one corner of his sitting-room."

"Yes; but the possession of a few French novels scarcely proves that he was in Paris in the year '53. Did you look at the titles of the books?"

"No; What could I have gained by seeing them?"

"Something, perhaps. The French are a volatile people. The fashion of one year is not the fashion of another. If you had found some work that made a *furore* in that particular year, you might have argued that Launcelot Darrell was a *flâneur* in the Galerie d'Orleans, or on the Boulevard, where the book was newly exhibited in the shop-windows. If the novels were new ones, and not Michel Lévy's eternal reprints of Sand and Soulié, Balzac and Bernard, you might have learnt something from them. The science of detection, Mrs. Mouckton, lies in the observation of insignificant things. It is a species of mental geology. A geologist looks into the gravel pit, and tells you the history of the creation; a clever detective ransacks a man's carpet-bag, and convicts that man of a murder or a forgery."

"I know I have been very stupid," Eleanor murmured almost piteously.

"Heaven forbid that you should ever be very clever in such a line as this. There must be detective officers; they are the polished blood-hounds of our civilised age, and very noble and estimable animals when they do their duty conscientiously; but fair-haired young ladies should be kept out of this *galère*. Think no more of this business, then, Eleanor. If Launcelot Darrell was the man who played écarté with your father on the 11th of August, '53, I'll find a proof of his guilt. Trust me to do that."

"I will trust you, Richard."

Mrs. Monckton held out her hand with a certain queenliness of gesture, as if she would thereby have ratified a bond between herself and her old friend; and as the flower of bygone chivalry were wont to vow the accomplishment of great deeds on the jewelled hilt of a cross-handled sword, so Richard Thornton, bending his honest head, swore allegiance upon the hand of Gilbert Monckton's young wife.

"One word more, Mrs. Monckton," said the scene-painter, "and then we had better leave off talking, or people will begin to wonder why we

are so confidential and mysterious. This Mr. Darrell is an artist, I understand. Does he paint much?"

"Oh yes, a great deal; that is to say, he begins a great many things."

"Precisely; he does a good many rough sketches, scraps of pencil and crayon, eh?"

"Yes."

"And he fills portfolios with such scraps, and litters his studio with them?"

"Yes."

"Then I must have a look at his studio, Mrs. Monckton. An artist—yes, even the poorest artist, the furthest away from the sublimity of genius, is sure to be fond of his art. He makes a confidant of it; he betrays a hundred secrets, that he keeps locked from every living creature, in the freedom of his studio. His pencil is the outer expression of his mind; and whatever falsehoods he may impose upon his fellow-men, his sketch-book will tell the truth. It will betray him when he is false, and reveal him when he is true. I must have a look at Launcelot Darrell's studio, Mrs. Monckton. Let me see the man's pictures; and I may be able to tell you more about the man himself."

CHAPTER XV.

THE TESTIMONY OF THE SKETCH-BOOK.

It is only natural that one painter should take an interest in the work of another. Mr. Darrell testified no surprise, therefore, when Richard Thornton appeared at Hazlewood the morning after his arrival at Tolldale, under convoy of Mrs. Monckton and Laura.

"I've come to say how sorry I was at your not coming to dinner last night, dear Mrs. Darrell," Laura said to the lady who was so soon to be her mother-in-law; "and I want to ask you whether I ought to have the sprigged muslin morning dresses trimmed with pink or blue, or whether I ought to have three of them pink and three blue, for Launcelot might get tired of seeing me in the same colours, you know, and I might have two of them trimmed with peach, if it came to that; and Eleanor has come with me; and Mr. Thornton—Mr. Thornton, Mrs. Darrell; Mrs.

Darrell, Mr. Thornton—has come too, because he is an artist, and wants to see Launcelot's pictures—especially the beautiful picture that's going into the Academy, and that the committee is sure to hang on the line; and I'm sure Launcelot will let Mr. Thornton see his studio,—won't you, dear Launcelot?"

Miss Mason pursed up her rosy lips, and put her head on one side like an insinuating canary, as she addressed her affianced husband. She looked very pretty in her winter costume, with a good deal of rich brown fur about her, and a dash of scarlet here and there. She looked like a fashionably-dressed Red Ridinghood, simple enough to be deluded by the weakest-minded of wolves. She was so pretty that her lover glanced down at her with a gratified smile, deriving considerable pleasure from the idea that she belonged to him, and that she was, on the whole, something to be rather proud of; something that added to the young sultan's dignity, and bore testimony to his supreme merits.

Eleanor looked at the lovers with a contemptuous curve lifting her firm upper lip. She despised Launcelot Darrell so utterly, that

she was almost cruel enough to despise Laura for loving him.

"Yes," she thought, "Mr. Monckton is right. Shallow, selfish, and frivolous! He is all these, and he is false as well. Heaven help you, Laura, if I cannot save you from a marriage with this man."

Mr. Darrell was very well pleased to do the honours of his studio to Richard Thornton. It would be quite a new sort of thing to this scene-painting fellow, the embryo Academician thought: the poor devil would pick up fresh ideas, and get a glimpse at the higher regions of art, for the first time in his life perhaps.

Launcelot Darrell led the way to that pleasant, prettily-furnished room which he called his studio. The "Rosalind and Celia" still occupied the post of honour on the easel. Mr. Darrell worked very hard; but in that spasmodic fashion which is antagonistic to anything like progress. The enthusiasm which upon one occasion kept him at his picture long after the fading light had given him notice to leave it, entirely deserted him upon another; and was perhaps followed by a fit of disgust with himself and with his art, which kept him idle for weeks together.

He made a merit of this fitfulness, depreciating a power of steady and persistent labour as the faculty of a tradesman, rather than an artist. He took credit to himself for the long pauses of idleness in which he waited for what he called inspiration; and imposed upon his mother by his grand talk about earnestness, conscientiousness, reverence for the sublimity of art; and a great many more fine phrases by which he contrived to excuse the simple fact of his laziness. So Eleanor Vane, as sorrowful *Rosalind*, still smiled sadly upon a simpering *Celia*:—it had been quite impossible to prevent Miss Mason's assuming the conventional simper of the weak-minded sitter, who can't forget that his portrait is being taken, and that he is in the very act of handing down his smile to posterity, or to the furniture brokers—out of an unfinished background, and clad in robes of unfinished satin and velvet. Mr. Thornton wondered as he looked at the young man's work, and remembered how many miles of canvas it had been his own fate to cover since first he had handled his brushes, and splashed in sky borders and cloud pieces for the chief scene-painter at the Phœnix.

Launcelot Darrell, with his mahlstick in his hand, smiled with sublime patronage upon Eleanor's humble friend.

"This sort of thing is rather different to what you've been used to, I suppose?" he said; "rather another kind of work than your pantomime scenes, your grots of everlasting bliss, and caves of constant content, where the waterfalls are spangles sewn upon white tape, and the cloudless skies are blue gauze and silver foil?"

"But we're not always painting transformations, you know," Mr. Thornton answered, in nowise offended by the artist's graceful insolence; "scene-painting isn't *all* done with Dutch metal and the glue-pot: we're obliged to know a little about perspective, and to have a slight knowledge of colour. Some of my brotherhood have turned out tolerable landscape-painters, Mr. Darrell. By-the-by, you don't do anything in the way of landscape, do you?"

"Yes," Launcelot Darrell answered, indifferently, "I used to try my hand at landscape; but human interest, human interest, Mr. Thornton, is the strong point of a picture. To my mind a picture should be a story, a drama, a tragedy, a

poem—something that explains itself without any help from a catalogue."

"Precisely. An epic upon a Bishop's half-length," Richard Thornton answered, rather absently. He saw Eleanor's watchful eyes fixed upon him, and knew that with every moment she was losing faith in him. Looking round the room he saw, too, that there were a couple of bloated portfolios leaning against the wall, and running over with sheets of dirty Bristol board and crumpled drawing paper.

"Yes," Launcelot Darrell repeated, "I have tried my hand at landscape. There are a few in one of those portfolios—the upper one, I think—not the purple one; I keep private memoranda and scraps in that. The green portfolio, Mr. Thornton; you may find some things there that will interest you—that might be useful to you, perhaps."

The artist threw down his mahlstick, and strolled across the room to talk to Laura Mason and his mother, who were sitting near the fire. In doing this he left Eleanor and Richard side by side, near the easel and the corner in which the portfolios leaned against the wall.

There was a large old-fashioned window in this

corner of the room, the casement against which Eleanor had stood when Launcelot Darrell asked her to be his wife. The window was in a deep recess, shaded by thick crimson curtains, and in the recess there was a table. Any one sitting at this table was almost concealed from the other inmates of the room.

Richard Thornton lifted both the portfolios, and placed them on this table. Eleanor stood beside him, breathless and expectant.

"The purple portfolio contains private memoranda," whispered the young man; "it is in that portfolio we must look, Mrs. Monckton. There is no such thing as honour on the road we have chosen for ourselves."

The scene-painter untied the strings of the loaded scrap-book, and flung it open. A chaotic mass of drawings lay before him. Crayon sketches; pencil scraps; unfinished, and finished water-coloured drawings; rough caricatures in pen-and-ink, and in water-colours; faint indications of half-obliterated subjects; heads, profiles, chins, and noses; lithographed costumes; prints; etchings; illustrations torn out of books and newspapers; all flung together in bewildering confusion.

Mr. Thornton, seated at the table with his head bent over the papers before him, and with Eleanor standing at his shoulder, began steadily and deliberately to examine the contents of this purple portfolio.

He carefully scrutinised each drawing, however slight, however roughly done, however unpretentious. He looked also at the back of each drawing, sometimes finding a blank, sometimes a faint pencil indication of a rubbed-out sketch, or a rough outline in pen-and-ink.

For a long time he found nothing in which the utmost ingenuity could discover any relation to that period of Launcelot Darrell's existence which Eleanor believed to have been spent in Paris.

"Belisarius. Girl with basket of strawberries. Marie Antoinette. Headsman. Flower-girl. Oliver Cromwell refusing the crown. Oliver Cromwell denouncing Sir Harry Vane. Oliver Cromwell and his daughters. Fairfax,"—muttered Richard, as he looked over the sketches. "Didn't I tell you, Eleanor, that a man's sketch-book contains the record of his life? These Cromwell drawings are all dated in the same year. Nearly ten years ago; that is to say, when Mr. Darrell had very little knowledge of

anatomy, and a tremendous passion for republicanism. Further on we come to a pastoral strata, you see. The Watermill: Rosa. There is a perpetual recurrence of Rosa and the Watermill; Rosa in a bridal dress; the mill by moonlight; Rosa in a russet cloak; the mill in a thunder-storm; Rosa sad; the mill at sunset; and the series bears date two years later, when the artist was desperately in love with a rustic beauty in this neighbourhood. Now we lose sight of Rosa, and come upon a Roman period; the artist goes in for the grand and classic. The Roman period lasts a very short time. Now we are in London; yes, we are up to our eyes in student life in the metropolis. Here are sketches of artist existence in Clipstone Street and the purlieus of Fitzroy Square. Here is the Haymarket by night. An opera-box. Lady Clara Vere de Vere. Lady Clara at the flower show—in Hyde Park—at a concert. Aha! the artist is in love again; and this time the beauty is high-born and unapproachable. Here are pen-and-ink hints at contemplated suicide; a young man lying on a pallet bed, an empty bottle on the floor labelled Prussic Acid; the same young man leaning over the parapet of Waterloo Bridge on a

moonlit night, with St. Paul's in the background. Yes, there have been wasted love and despair, and a wild yearning for death, and that generally morbid and unpleasant state of mind which is the common result of idleness and strong liquors. Stay!" cried Richard Thornton suddenly, "we're all wrong here."

"What do you mean?" asked Eleanor. She had watched the young man's examination of the drawings with eager interest, with ever-increasing impatience, in her desire to come to something that should be evidence against Launcelot Darrell.

"What do you mean?" she said, and then she added impatiently: "How slow you are, Dick! What do I want to know of this man except the one proof that will identify him with that man upon the Boulevard?"

"I'm afraid we've been making a mistake all this time," Richard said, in rather a despondent tone. "These sketches must have been done by some companion of Mr. Darrell's. I'm afraid they're none of them his."

"Not his? But why—why not?"

"Because the first lot, the Cromwells and the Rosas, are all signed with a flourishing autograph

—'Launcelot Darrell, pinxt.,' in full, as if the young man was rather proud of his name."

"Yes, yes; but what then?"

"The London-life sketches, the Lady Claras, and the suicides, which are much better than the first lot, though I should have thought they had been by the same man, are all signed with a monogram."

"A monogram?"

"Yes, of two initials. I've been trying to make them out for ever so long, and I've only just succeeded. The two letters are R. L."

Richard Thornton felt Eleanor's hand, which had been resting lightly upon the back of his chair, tighten suddenly upon the rosewood scroll-work; he heard her breath grow quicker; and when he turned his head he saw that she was deadly pale.

"It is coming home to him, Richard," she said. "The man who cheated my father called himself 'Robert Lan—' Part of the name was torn away in my father's letter, but the initials of that false name are R. L. Go on, Dick; go on quickly, for pity's sake; we shall find something more presently."

Eleanor Monckton had spoken in a whisper,

but at this moment the scene-painter laid his hand upon her wrist and reminded her by a gesture of the need of caution. But Mr. Darrell, and the two ladies at the other end of the roomy studio, were in no manner observant of anything that might be going on in the curtained recess of the window. Laura was talking, and her lover was laughing at her; half pleased, half amused, by her childish frivolity.

Richard Thornton turned over a heap of sketches without speaking.

But presently he came upon a water-colour drawing of a long lamplit street, crowded with figures in grotesque costumes, and with masks upon their faces.

"We have crossed the Channel, Eleanor," he said. "Here is Paris in Carnival time, and here is the assumed name, too, in full,—'Robert Lance, March 2nd, '53.' Be quiet, Eleanor, be calm, for Heaven's sake. The man is guilty; I believe that, now, as fully as you do; but we have to bring his guilt home to him."

"Keep that sketch, Richard," whispered the girl, "keep it. It is the proof of his false name. It is the proof that he was in Paris when he was believed to be in India. It is the proof that he

was in Paris a few months before my father's death."

The scene-painter folded the tumbled sheet of drawing-paper and thrust it into the breast pocket of his loose overcoat.

"Go on, Richard; go on," said Eleanor; "there may be something more than this."

The young man obeyed his eager companion; one by one he looked at the pen-and-ink sketches, the crayon drawings, the unfinished scraps in Indian ink or water colour.

They all bore evidence of a life in Paris and its neighbourhood. Now a *débardeur* hanging on the arm of a student; now a grisette drinking lemonade with an artisan beyond the barrier; a funeral train entering the gates of Père la Chaise; some children, with garlands in their hands, kneeling by a grave; a showman on the Boulevard; a group of Zouaves; a bit of landscape in the forest of Saint Germain, with equestrian figures beneath an arch of foliage; a scene in the Champs Elysées.

And at last, a rough pencil sketch of a group in a small chamber at a *café;* an old man seated at a lamplit table playing *écarté* with a man whose face was hidden; an aristocratic-looking,

shabby-genteel old man, whose nervous fingers seemed to clutch restlessly at a little pile of napoleons on the table before him.

There was a third figure: the figure of a smartly-dressed Frenchman standing behind the old man's chair; and in this watcher of the game Eleanor recognised the man who had persuaded her father to leave her on the Boulevard, the companion of the sulky Englishman.

The sketch was dated August 12, 1853; the very day on which Richard Thornton had recognised the dead man in the ghastly chamber of the Morgue. On the back of the drawing were written these words, "Sketch for finished picture to be called 'The last of the Napoleons'—Robert Lance."

The likeness of the principal figure to George Vane was unmistakeable. The man who had been heartless enough to cheat his kinsman's friend, had made this record of the scene of his cruelty; but had not been so callous as to carry out his design after the suicide of his victim.

CHAPTER XVI.

MAURICE DE CRESPIGNY'S WILL.

Richard Thornton folded the pencil sketch and put it in his pocket with the water-coloured drawing.

"I told you that Launcelot Darrell would make a confidant of his pencil," he said in a low voice. "We may as well tie up the portfolio, Mrs. Monckton; there will be nothing more in it that can help us. The memory of your father would scarcely be pleasant to this young man after the 12th of August. When he made this sketch he had yet to learn the consequences of what he had done."

Eleanor stood behind the scene-painter's chair silent and motionless. Her face was pale, and her mouth compressed and rigid with the effort by which she controlled her agitation. But a flame of fire burned in her eyes, and her nostrils quivered with a convulsive movement.

Mr. Thornton carefully replaced the sketches in the purple portfolio, tied the strings, and laid the book in its old place against the wall. Then, unfastening the green portfolio, he went rapidly through the landscape scraps which it contained.

"The hand is weak here," Richard said: "Mr. Launcelot Darrell has no sympathy with nature. He might be a clever figure painter if he had as much perseverance as he has talent. His pictures are like himself; shallow, artificial, and meretricious; but they are clever."

The scene-painter said this with a purpose. He knew that Eleanor stood behind him, erect and statuesque, with her hand grasping the back of his chair, a pale Nemesis bent on revenge and destruction. He wanted, if possible, to let her down to commonplace feeling, by his commonplace talk, before Launcelot Darrell saw her face. But, looking round at that pale young face, Richard saw how terrible was the struggle in the girl's breast, and how likely she was at any moment to betray herself.

"Eleanor," he whispered, "if you want to carry this business to the end, you must keep your secret. Launcelot Darrell is coming this

way. Remember that an artist is quick to observe. There is the plot of a tragedy in your face at this moment."

Mrs. Monckton tried to smile; but the attempt was very feeble; the smile wan and sickly. Launcelot Darrell came to the curtained recess, but he was not alone: Laura Mason came with him, talking very fast, and asking innumerable questions, now turning to her lover, now appealing to Eleanor or Richard Thornton.

"What a time you've been looking over the sketches," she said, "and how do you like them, and which do you like best? Do you like the sea-side bits, or the forest sketches? There's a picture of Tolldale with the cupola and the dinner-bell, Eleanor; I like the sketches in the other portfolio best; Launcelot lets *me* look at them, though he won't allow any one else to see them. But I don't like Rosa. I'm terribly jealous of Rosa—yes, I *am*, Launcelot; and it's not a bit of use telling me you were never in love with her, and you only admired her because she was a pretty rustic model. Nobody in the world could believe that, could they, Mr. Thornton? Could they, Eleanor? When an artist paints the same face again and again, and again and again,

he must be in love with the original; mustn't he now?"

Nobody answered the young lady's eager questions. Launcelot Darrell smiled and twisted his dark moustache between his slender, womanish fingers. Laura's unrestrained admiration of him was very agreeable; and he was beginning to be in love with her, after his own fashion, which was a very easy one.

Eleanor looked at her husband's ward with a strange expression in her face—a stern unpitying gaze that promised little good to the young heiress.

"What is this foolish girl's fancy to me, that it should weigh against my father's death?" she thought. "What is it to me that she may have to suffer? Let me remember the bitterness of his sufferings; let me remember that long night upon which I watched for him,—that miserable night in which he despaired and died. Surely the remembrance of this will shut every thought of pity from my heart."

Perhaps Eleanor Monckton had need to reason with herself thus. It might be difficult to be true to her scheme of vengeance, when, in the path she had to tread, this girl's heart must be

trampled upon; this innocent, childish, confiding little creature who had clung to her, and trusted in her, and loved her, from the hour of their first meeting.

"Should I be pitiful, or merciful, or just to her, if I suffered her to marry a bad man?" Mrs. Monckton asked herself. "No; for her sake as much as for the memory of my father, it is my duty to denounce Launcelot Darrell."

Throughout the drive back to Tolldale, Mrs. Monckton silently brooded upon the morning's work. Richard Thornton had indeed proved a powerful ally. How often she had been in that studio, and not once had the idea of looking amongst the artist's sketches for the evidence of his life occurred to her.

"I told you that you could help me, Richard," she said, when she found herself alone with the scene-painter. "You have given me the proof which I have waited for so long. I will go to Woodlands to-night."

"What for?"

"To show those two sketches to Mr. de Crespigny."

"But will that proof be strong enough to convince a man whose powers of perception must be

weakened by age? What if Mr. de Crespigny should fail to understand the evidence of those sketches? What if he should refuse to believe your accusation of his nephew?"

"I will show him my father's letter."

"You forget that your father's letter accuses Robert Lance, and not Launcelot Darrell."

"But the sketches are signed 'Robert Lance.'"

"And Mr. Darrell may deny his identity with the man who signed himself by that name. You cannot ask Maurice de Crespigny to believe in his nephew's guilt on the testimony of a pencil drawing which that nephew may boldly repudiate. No, Eleanor, the work of to-day is only one step upon the road we have to tread. We must be patient, and wait for more conclusive proof than that which we hold in these two sketches."

Eleanor sighed wearily.

"And in the meantime the 15th of March may come, or Mr. de Crespigny may die," she said. "Oh, let me go to him at once; let me tell him who I am, and show him my father's letter; let me tell him the cruel story of his old friend's death! He knows nothing but that which he learned from a brief notice in a newspaper. He *cannot* refuse to believe me."

Richard Thornton shook his head.

"You have asked me to help you, Eleanor," he said gravely; "if I am to do so, you must have some faith in my counsel. Wait until we have fuller power to prove our case, before you reveal yourself to Mr. de Crespigny."

Mrs. Monckton could not very well refuse to submit herself to the scene-painter's guidance. He had already most decisively demonstrated the superiority of his deliberate policy, as compared with the impulsive and unconsidered course of action recklessly followed by a headstrong girl.

"I must obey you, Dick," Eleanor said, "because you are so good to me, and have done so much to prove that you are a great deal wiser than I am. But if Mr. de Crespigny should die while we are waiting for further proof, I—"

"You'll blame me for his death, I suppose, Mrs. Monckton," interrupted Richard, with a quiet smile, "after the manner of your sex?"

Eleanor had no little difficulty in obeying her counsellor, for when Gilbert Monckton met his wife at dinner, he told her that he had been at Woodlands that morning, and that her friend Maurice de Crespigny was daily growing weaker,

and was not expected to live through the early spring months.

"The old man is fading slowly away," the lawyer said. "His quiet and temperate habits have enabled him to hold out much longer than the doctors expected. It is like the gradual going out of a candle, they say. The flame sinks little by little in the socket. You must go and see the poor old man, Eleanor, before he dies."

"Before he dies!" repeated Mrs. Monckton, "before he dies! Do you think he will die very soon, then, or suddenly?"

"Yes, I think he may go off suddenly at last. The medical men say as much, I understand."

Eleanor looked at Richard Thornton.

"I must see him, and must see him before he dies," she said. "Is his mind unimpaired, Gilbert? Is his intellect still as clear as it was a week ago?"

"Yes," answered Mr. Monckton, "I have every reason to believe so; for while I was talking to the two ladies in the breakfast-parlour, the chief clerk to Henry Lawford, the Windsor attorney, came in, and asked me to go up to Mr. de Crespigny's room. What do you think I was wanted for, Eleanor?"

"I have no idea."

"I was wanted to act as witness to the old man's will, in conjunction with Lawford's clerk. It seems the old man had sent to Windsor in a great hurry for Lawford; but Lawford happened to be out, so his clerk went instead, and De Crespigny had dictated the will to him. I need scarcely tell you I was not a little astonished to find that Maurice de Crespigny had only now made up his mind as to the disposal of his money. I suppose he has made half-a-dozen wills, and destroyed one after another according to his humour. I only hope the maiden sisters may get a decent reward for their long years of patience and expectation."

Eleanor's trembling fingers trifled nervously with the ornaments at her watch-chain. It was with difficulty that she could control her agitation.

"But to whom is the fortune left?" she asked breathlessly. "Did you hear that, Gilbert?"

"No, my dear, it isn't usual to make the witness to a will acquainted with the body of the deed. I saw poor Maurice de Crespigny execute his feeble autograph, and I put my own muscular-looking signature in the place indicated to me,

and I asked no questions. It was enough for me to know that *I* had no interest in the document."

"But did Mr. de Crespigny say nothing—nothing that could lead you to guess who—"

"Mr. de Crespigny said nothing whatever calculated to throw any light upon his intentions. He seemed relieved by the idea that his will was made and the business settled. The clerk wanted to carry off the document, but the old man insisted on keeping it in his possession. He wished to look over it, he said. He wanted to see if his intentions had been fully carried out, in the spirit as well as in the letter. He put the parchment under his pillow, and then laid down with an air of satisfaction. I dare say he has gone through the same little comedy again and again before to-day."

"Perhaps he will destroy this will?" Eleanor said, thoughtfully.

"Yes," Mr. Monckton answered, indifferently, "the old man may change his mind again, if he lives long enough to repent of this new will. But I doubt his surviving so long as to do that."

"And have you no idea, Gilbert,—have you no idea as to whom the fortune is left?

Mr. Monckton smiled.

"This is a question that concerns you, Laura," he said, "a great deal more nearly than it does us."

"What question?" asked Miss Mason, looking up from an elaborate piece of embroidery which she had been showing to Signora Picirillo.

"We are talking of Mr. de Crespigny's fortune, my dear; you are interested in the disposal of that, are you not?"

"Oh yes, of course," answered the young lady, "I ought to be interested for Launcelot's sake, I know; and I know that he ought to have the fortune, and that nobody has any right to deprive him of it, especially those nasty old maids who had him sent to India against his will, and I dare say he will have horrid pains in his liver from the climate when he's older. Of course he ought to have the fortune, and yet sometimes I think it would be nicer for him to be poor. He may never be a great artist if he's rich, perhaps; and I'd rather go to Rome with him and sit by his easel while he works, and pay the hotel bills, and the travelling expenses, and all that sort of thing, out of my own money, than have him a country gentleman. I shouldn't like him to be a country gentleman; he'd have to hunt, and wear

top-boots and nasty leather gaiters, like a common ploughman, when he went out shooting. I hate country gentlemen. Byron hasn't one country gentleman in all his poems, and that horrid husband in Locksley Hall will show you what an opinion Tennyson has of them."

Miss Mason went back to the Signora and the embroidery, satisfied with having settled the business in her own manner.

"He couldn't look like the Corsair if he had Woodlands," she murmured, despondently; "he'd have to shave off his moustache if they made him a magistrate. What would be the good of his talking seriously to poachers if he wore turned-down collars and loose handkerchiefs round his neck? People would never respect him unless he was a Guy; with creaky boots, and big seals hanging to his watch-chain."

Eleanor pushed the question still further.

"You think that Mr. de Crespigny has left his fortune to Launcelot Darrell, don't you, Gilbert?" she asked.

Her husband, prompted by the evil spirit that was his occasional companion, looked at her, rather suspiciously; but her eyes met his own with an unfaltering gaze.

"Why are you so interested in this fortune, and in Launcelot Darrell?" he said.

"I will tell you by-and-by. But tell me now, if you think the estate is left to Mr. Darrell?"

"I think it scarcely unlikely that it is so. The fact of Maurice de Crespigny making a fresh will within six months of the young man's return looks rather as if he had been led to relent of some previous determination by the presence of his niece's son."

"But Mr. de Crespigny has seen very little of Launcelot Darrell."

"Perhaps not," answered Mr. Monckton, coldly. "I may be quite wrong in my conjecture. You ask for my opinion, and I give it you freely. Pray let us change the subject. I hate the idea of all this speculation as to who shall stand in a dead man's shoes. As far as Launcelot Darrell's interests are concerned, I really think there is an undercurrent of common sense in Laura's romantic talk. He may be all the better for being a poor man. He may be all the better for having to go to Italy and work at his art for a few years."

Mr. Monckton looked sharply at his young wife as he said this. I rather think that the

demon familiar had prompted this speech, and that the lawyer watched Eleanor's face in the desire to discover whether there was anything unpleasant to her in the idea of Launcelot Darrell's long absence from his native country.

But, clever as Gilbert Monckton was, the mystery of his wife's face was as yet beyond his power to read. He watched her in vain. The pale and thoughtful countenance told nothing to the man who wanted the master key by which alone its expression could be read.

CHAPTER XVII.

RICHARD'S DISCOVERY.

An almost ungovernable impulse prompted Eleanor Monckton to make her way at once into Maurice de Crespigny's sick-chamber, and say to him, "Launcelot Darrell is the wretch who caused your old friend's cruel death. I call upon you, by the memory of the past, to avenge that dead friend's wrongs!"

The struggle was a terrible one, but discretion in the end triumphed, and Eleanor submitted herself to the guidance of her devoted slave and ally. She knew now that Launcelot Darrell was guilty; but she had known that from the moment in which she had seen him lounging in the Windsor street. The task that lay before her was to procure such proof as must be convincing to the old man. In spite of her impetuous desire for immediate action, Eleanor was compelled to acknowledge that the testimony of the sketch-

book was not strong enough in itself to condemn Launcelot Darrell.

The young man's answer to any accusation brought against him on such evidence would be simple enough.

Nothing would be easier than for him to say, "My name is not Robert Lance. The drawing abstracted by unfair means from my portfolio is not mine. I am not responsible for the actions of the man who made that sketch."

And against this simple declaration there would be nothing but Eleanor's unsupported assertion of the identity between the two men.

There was nothing to be done, then, except to follow Richard Thornton's advice, and wait.

This waiting was very weary work. Estranged from her husband by the secret of her life,—unhappy in the society of Laura Mason, against whose happiness she felt that she was, in a manner, plotting; restrained and ill at ease even in the familiar companionship of Eliza Picirillo,—Eleanor Monckton wandered about the great rambling mansion which had become her home, restless and unhappy, yearning with a terrible impatience for the coming of the end, however dark that end might be. Every day, and often

more than once in the course of the day, she locked herself in her room, and opened the desk in which she kept Launcelot Darrell's sketches and her dead father's last letter. She looked at these things almost as if she feared that by some diabolical influence they might be taken from her before they had served as the instruments of her revenge. So the weary days wore themselves out. The first week of Richard's visit; the second week of Richard's visit passed by; the middle of February came, and nothing more had been done.

Eleanor's health began to suffer from the perpetual mental fever of anxiety and impatience. Her husband saw her day by day growing thinner and paler; a hectic flush crimsoned her cheek now at every trifling agitation, with every surprise, however insignificant; but, except for these transient flushes, her face was as colourless as marble.

Her husband saw this, and made himself miserable because of the change in his young wife. He made himself still more wretched by reason of those unworthy doubts and suspicions that were for ever torturing him. "Why was Eleanor ill? Why was she unhappy?" He

asked himself this latter question a thousand times a day, and always answered it more or less after the same fashion.

She was unhappy because of the swiftly approaching marriage between Laura Mason and Launcelot Darrell. She had opposed that marriage with all the power she possessed. She had over-estimated her own fortitude when she sacrificed her love for the young artist to her desire to win a brilliant position.

"Why should she be different from other women?" the lawyer thought. "She has married me for my money, and she is sorry for what she has done, and perhaps upon the eve of poor Laura's wedding day, there will be a repetition of the scene that took place at Lausanne nearly twenty years ago." This was the manner of meditation to which Mr. Monckton abandoned himself when the black mood was upon him.

All this time Launcelot Darrell came backwards and forwards between Hazlewood and Tolldale, after the free-and-easy manner of an accepted lover, who feels that, whatever advantages he may obtain by the matrimonial treaty which he is about to form, his own transcendent

merits are so far above every meaner consideration as to render the lady the gainer by the bargain.

He came, therefore, whenever it pleased him to come. Now dawdling away a morning over the piano with Laura Mason; now playing billiards with Richard Thornton, who associated with him as it were under protest, hating him most cordially all the time.

"The detectives must have a hard time of it," reflected Mr. Thornton, after one of these mornings. "Imagine having to hob-and-nob with a William Palmer, on the chance of his dropping out a word or two that might help to bring him to the gallows. The profession is extremely honourable, no doubt, but I don't think it can be a very pleasant one. I fancy, upon the whole, a muddy crossing and a good broom must be more agreeable to a man's feelings."

The 15th of February came, dark, cold, and dreary, and Eleanor reminded the scene-painter that only one month now remained before the day appointed for Laura's marriage. That young lady, absorbed amongst a chaos of ribbons and laces, silks and velvets, had ceased to feel any jealousy of her guardian's wife. Her lover's easy

acceptance of her devotion was sufficient for her happiness. What should the Corsair do but twist his black moustaches and permit Medora to worship him?

It was on this very 15th of February that, for the first time since the visit to Launcelot Darrell's studio, Mr. Richard Thornton made a discovery.

It was not a very important one, perhaps, nor did it bear directly upon the secret of the artist's life, but it was something.

The scene-painter left Tolldale soon after breakfast upon this bleak February day, in a light dog-cart which Mr. Monckton placed at the disposal of any guest who might wish to explore the neighbouring country. Richard did not return until dusk, and he broke in upon Eleanor's solitude as the shadows were gathering outside the window of the room in which she sat. He found his old companion alone in a little morning-room, next her husband's study. She was sitting on a low stool by the hearth, her head resting on her hands, and the red firelight on her face; her attitude altogether expressive of care and despondency.

The door of communication between Gilbert

Monckton's study and the room in which Eleanor sat was closed.

The girl started and looked up as Richard Thornton opened the door. The day had been wet as well as cold; drops of rain and sleet hung about the young man's rough great-coat, and he brought a damp and chilly atmosphere into the room.

"Is it you, Richard?" Eleanor said, absently.

"Yes, Mrs. Monckton, I have been out all day; I have been to Windsor."

"Indeed!"

"Yes. I met Launcelot Darrell there."

"You met Launcelot Darrell!" repeated Eleanor. "Richard," she cried, suddenly, rising as she spoke, and going to where the young man stood, "you have found out something more."

"I have not found what we want, Eleanor. I have not found the proof that you must lay before Mr. de Crespigny, when you ask him to leave his estate away from his nephew. But I think I have made a discovery."

"What discovery?" asked Mrs. Monckton, with suppressed eagerness; "do not speak loudly,

Dick," she added, in a whisper, "my husband is in the next room. I sit with him sometimes when he is at work there with his law papers, but I can't help fancying that my presence annoys him. He is not the same to me that he used to be. Oh, Richard, Richard, I feel as if I was divided from every creature in the world, except you: I can trust you, for you know my secret. When will this end?"

"Very soon, my dear, I hope," Mr. Thornton answered, gravely. "There was a time when I urged you to abandon your purpose, Eleanor, but I do so no longer. Launcelot Darrell is a bad man, and the poor little girl with the blue eyes and flaxen ringlets must not be suffered to fall into his power."

"No, no, not for the world. But you have made some discovery to-day, Richard?"

"I think so. You remember what Mr. Monckton told us the other day. You remember his telling us that Mr. de Crespigny had only that day made his will?"

"Yes, I remember it perfectly."

"Laura Mason was present when her guardian told us this. It is only natural she should tell Launcelot Darrell what had happened."

"She tells him everything; she would be sure to tell him that."

"Precisely, and Mr. Darrell has not been slow to act upon the hint."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that Launcelot Darrell has been guilty of the baseness of bribing Mr. Lawford's clerk, in order to find out the secret of the contents of that will."

"How do you know this?"

"I discovered it by the merest chance. You owe me no praises, Eleanor. I begin to think that the science of detection is, after all, very weak and imperfect; and that the detective officer owes many of his greatest triumphs to patience, and a series of happy accidents. Yes, Eleanor, Mr. Launcelot Darrell's eagerness, or avarice, whichever you will, would not suffer him to wait until his great-uncle's death. He was determined to know the contents of that will; and, whatever the knowledge may have cost him, I fancy that he is scarcely satisfied with his bargain."

"Why?"

"Because I believe that the Woodlands property is not left to him."

There was a noise as of the movement of a heavy chair in the next room.

"Hush," Eleanor whispered; "my husband is going to dress for dinner."

A bell rang while she was speaking, and Richard heard the door of the next room opened and shut.

CHAPTER XVIII.

WHAT HAPPENED AT WINDSOR.

"YES," repeated Richard Thornton, "I have reason to believe that the will witnessed by your husband is a very unpleasant piece of literature in the estimation of Launcelot Darrell, for I fancy that it gives a death-blow to all his expectations, and leaves him without even the meagre consolation of that solitary shilling which is usually inherited by unhappy elder sons."

"But tell me why you think this, Richard."

"I will, my dear Mrs. Monckton. The story is rather a long one, but I think I can tell it in a quarter of an hour. Can you dress for dinner in the other quarter?"

"Oh, yes, yes!"

"What a nuisance civilisation is, Nelly. We never dressed for dinner in the Pilasters; indeed, the fashion amongst the leading families in that locality leans rather the other way. The gentle-

men in the cab and chimney line generally take off their coats when the mid-day meal is announced, in order to dine coolly and comfortably in their shirt-sleeves."

"Richard, Richard!" cried Eleanor, impatiently.

"Well, well, Mrs. Monckton, seriously, you shall have my Windsor adventures. I hate this man Launcelot Darrell, for I believe he is a shallow, selfish, cold-hearted coxcomb; or else I don't think I could have brought myself to do what I've done to-day. I've been playing the spy, Eleanor, for a couple of hours at least. The Duke of Otranto used to find plenty of people for this kind of work,—artists, actors, actresses, priests, women, every creature whom you would least suspect of baseness. But they manage these things better in France. We don't take to the business so readily upon this side of the water."

"Richard!"

The girl's impatience was almost uncontrollable. She watched the hands of a little clock upon the chimney-piece: the firelight flashed every now and then upon the dial, and then faded out, leaving it dark.

"I'm coming to the story, Nell, if you'll only

be patient," remonstrated Mr. Thornton. He was getting over that secret sorrow which he had nursed for such a long time in the lowest depths of a most true and faithful breast. He was growing reconciled to the Inevitable; as we all must, sooner or later; and he had resumed that comfortable brotherly familiarity which had been so long habitual to him in his intercourse with Eleanor. "Only be patient, my dear, and let me tell my story my own way," he pleaded. "I left here early this morning in your husband's dog-cart, intending to drive over to Windsor and amuse myself by exploring the town, and the castle, if possible, to see if there was anything in my way to be picked up—donjon keeps, turret staircases, secret corridors, and so on, you know. You remember what sort of a morning it was, bleak and dismal enough, but until twelve o'clock no rain. It was within a quarter of an hour of twelve when I got into Windsor, and the rain was just beginning, spiteful drops of rain and particles of sleet, that came down obliquely and cut into your face like so many needle-points. I stopped at an inn in a perpendicular street below the castle, which looks as if it means to topple down and annihilate that part of the town some of

these days. I put up the dog-cart, and asked a few questions about the possibility of getting admission to the royal dwelling-place. Of course I was informed that such admission was to-day utterly impracticable. I could have seen the state apartments yesterday. I could see them, most likely, by the end of next week; but I couldn't see them when I wanted to see them. I hinted that my chief desire was to see secret passages, donjon keeps, moats, and sliding panels; but neither the landlord nor the waiter seemed to understand me, and I sat down rather despondently by the window of the tavern parlour to wait till the rain was over, and I could go out and prowl upon the castle terrace to study wintry effects in the park."

"But Launcelot Darrell, Richard—where did you meet Launcelot Darrell?"

"I am coming to him presently. The perpendicular street wasn't particularly lively upon this wretched February day; so, as there weren't any passers-by to look at, I amused myself by looking at the houses facing the inn. Immediately opposite to me there was a house very superior to the others in style—a red brick house of the Georgian era, modernised by plate-glass windows and green

blinds—not a large house, but eminently respectable. A dazzling brass plate adorned the door, and upon this brass plate, which winked and twinkled in the very face of the rain, I read the name of Mr. Henry Lawford, solicitor."

"The lawyer whose clerk made Mr. de Crespigny's will?"

"Precisely. Upon one side of the door there was a bell-handle inscribed Visitors, on the other a duplicate handle inscribed Office. I hadn't been looking at the house above five minutes, when a young man, with a slender silk umbrella, struggling against the wind, rang the office-bell."

"The young man was Launcelot Darrell?" Eleanor cried, quickly.

"He was. The door was opened by a boy, of whom Mr. Darrell asked several questions. Whatever the answers were, he walked away, and the door was shut. But from his manner of strolling slowly along the street, I was convinced that he was not going far, and that he meant to come back. People don't usually stroll in a sharp rain that comes down obliquely and seems to drift in your face from every point of the compass. He'll come back presently, I thought; so I ordered a bottle of pale ale and I waited."

"And he came back?"

"Yes; he came back in about half an hour; but, ten minutes or so before he returned, I saw a shabby-genteel, elderly man let himself in with a latch-key at a small green side door with 'Clerk's Office' painted in white letters on the panel. I knew by the look of this man that he must be a clerk. There's a look about an attorney's clerk that you can't mistake, even when he doesn't carry a blue bag; and this man did carry one. Ten minutes afterwards Launcelot Darrell returned. This time he knocked with the handle of his umbrella at the green door, which was opened by the boy, who went to fetch the elderly clerk. This elderly clerk and Mr. Darrell stood on the door-step talking confidentially for about five minutes, and then our friend the artist went away; but this time again strolled slowly through the rain; as if he had a certain interval to dispose of, and scarcely knew what to do with himself.

"I suppose the amateur detective business fills a man's mind with all manner of suspicious fancies, Eleanor. However that may be, I could not help thinking that there was something queer in these two visits of Launcelot Darrell to the red brick house opposite me. What did he want with a

lawyer, in the first place? and if he did want a lawyer, why didn't he go straight to Mr. Lawford, who was at home—for I could see his head across the top of the wire blind in one of the plate-glass windows as he bent over his desk—instead of tampering with small boys and clerks? There was something mysterious in the manner of his hanging about the place; and as I had been watching him wearily for a long time without being able to find out anything mysterious in his conduct, I determined to make the most of my chances and watch him to some purpose to-day.

"'He'll come back,' I thought, 'unless I'm very much mistaken.'

"I was very much mistaken, for Launcelot Darrell did not come back; but a few minutes after the clock struck one, the green door opened, and the elderly clerk came out, without the blue bag this time, and walked nimbly up the street in the direction that Launcelot Darrell had taken.

"'He's going to his dinner,' I thought, 'or he's going to meet Launcelot Darrell.'

"I put on my hat, and went out of the house. The clerk was toiling up the perpendicular street a good way ahead of me, but I managed to keep

him in sight and to be close upon his heels when he turned the corner into the street below the towers of the castle. He walked a little way along this street, and then went into one of the principal hotels.

"'Ah, my friend!' I said, to myself, 'you don't ordinarily take your dinner at that house, I imagine. It's a cut above your requirements, I should think.'

"I went into the hotel, and made my way to the coffee-room. Mr. Launcelot Darrell and the shabby-genteel clerk were sitting at a table drinking sherry and soda-water. The artist was talking to his companion in a low voice, and very earnestly. It was not difficult to see that he was trying to persuade the seedy clerk to something which the clerk's sense of caution revolted from. Both men looked up as I went into the room, which they had had all to themselves until that moment; and Launcelot Darrell flushed scarlet as he recognised me. It was evident, therefore, that he did not care to be seen in the company of Mr. Lawford's clerk.

"'Good morning, Mr. Darrell,' I said; 'I've come over to have a look at the castle, but I find strangers are not admitted to-day, so I'm obliged

to content myself with walking about in the wet for an hour or two.'

"Launcelot Darrell answered me in that patronising manner which renders him so delightful to the people he considers inferior to himself. He had quite recovered from the confusion my sudden appearance had caused, and muttered something about Mr. Lawford, the attorney, and 'business.' Then he sat biting his nails in an uncomfortable and restless manner, while I drank another bottle of pale ale. That's another objection to the detective business; it involves such a lot of drinking.

"I left the hotel, and left Mr. Darrell and the clerk together; but I didn't go very far. I contrived somehow or other to be especially interested in that part of the exterior of the castle visible from the street in which the hotel is situated, and in a manner, kept one eye upon the stately towers of the royal residence, and the other upon the doorway out of which Launcelot Darrell and Mr. Lawford's clerk must by-and-by emerge. In about half an hour I had the satisfaction of seeing them appear, and contrived, most innocently of course, to throw myself exactly in their way at the corner of the perpendicular street.

"I was amply rewarded for any trouble that I had taken; for I never saw a face that so plainly expressed rage, mortification, disappointment, almost despair, as did the face of Launcelot Darrell, when I came against him at the street corner. He was as white as a sheet, and he scowled at me savagely as he passed me by. Not as if he recognised me; the fixed look in his face showed that his mind was too much absorbed by one thought for any consciousness of exterior things; but as if in his suppressed fury he was ready to go blindly against anybody or anything that came in his way."

"But why, Richard, why was he so angry?" cried Eleanor, with her hands clenched and her nostrils quivering with the passage of her rapid breath. "What does it all mean?"

"Unless I'm very much mistaken, Mrs. Monckton, it means that Launcelot Darrell has been tampering with the clerk of the lawyer who drew up Mr. de Crespigny's last will, and that he now knows the worst—"

"And that is—"

"The plain fact, that unless that will is altered the brilliant Mr. Darrell will not inherit a penny of his kinsman's fortune."

The second dinner bell rang while Richard was speaking, and Eleanor ran away to make some hurried change in her toilette, and to appear in the drawing-room, agitated and ill at ease, ten minutes after Mr. Monckton's punctilious butler had made his formal announcement of the principal meal of the day.

CHAPTER XIX

ANOTHER RECOGNITION.

LAUNCELOT DARRELL came to Tolldale Priory upon the day after Richard's visit to Windsor, and it was easy for Eleanor, assisted by her knowledge of what had transpired, to see the change in his manner. She spent an hour in the drawing-room that morning for the purpose of seeing this change, and thereby finding confirmation of that which Richard Thornton had told her. But the alteration in the young man's manner must have been very obvious, for even Laura, who was not particularly observant of any shades of feeling that did not make themselves manifest by the outward expression of word or gesture, perceived that there was something amiss with her lover, and drove Launcelot Darrell well-nigh mad with her childish questionings and lamentations.

Why was he so quiet? Why was he so much paler than usual? Why did he sigh sometimes?

Why did he laugh in that strange way? Oh, no, not in his usual way. It was no use saying that it was so. Had he a headache? Had he been sitting up late at night? Had he been drinking horrid wine that had disagreed with him? Had he been a naughty, naughty, cruel, false, treacherous boy, and had he been to some party that he hadn't told his poor Laura about, drinking champagne and flirting with girls, and dancing, and all that? Or had he been working too much at his new picture?

With such questions as these did the young lady harass and torment her lover throughout that uncomfortable February morning; until at last Mr. Darrell turned upon her in a rage, declaring that his head was nearly split asunder, and plainly telling her to hold her tongue.

Indeed, Mr. Launcelot Darrell made very little effort to disguise his feelings, but sat over the fire in a low easy chair, with his elbows resting on his knees, and his handsome dark eyes bent moodily upon the blaze. He roused himself now and then from a fit of gloomy thought to snatch up the polished-steel poker, and plunge it savagely amongst the coals, as if it was some relief to him to punish even them. Another man might have

feared the inferences which spectators might draw from his conduct, but the principle upon which Launcelot Darrell's life had been based involved an utter contempt for almost every living creature except himself, and he apprehended no danger from the watchfulness of the inferior beings about him.

Laura Mason, sitting on a low ottoman at his feet, and employed in working a pair of embroidered slippers—the third pair she had begun for the use of her future lord and master—thought him more like the Corsair to-day than ever; but thought at the same time that some periods of Medora's existence must have been rather dreary. No doubt it was Conrad's habit to sit and stare at the coals, and to poke the fire savagely when things went amiss with him; when his favourite barque was scuttled by a mutinous crew, or his cargo cnofiscated by the minions of the law.

Launcelot Darrell was engaged to dine at the Priory upon this 16th of February. Mr. Monckton had invited him, in order that some matters connected with Laura's fortune might be discussed.

"It is time we should fully understand each other, Darrell," the lawyer said; "so I shall expect

you to give me a couple of hours in my study this evening after dinner, if you've no objection."

Of course Mr. Darrell had no objection, but he had an almost spiteful manner that day in his intercourse with poor Laura, who was bewildered by the change in him.

"You think it's strange that I should dislike all this ceremony about settlements and allowance. Yes, Laura, *that's* a pleasant word, isn't it? Your guardian honoured me by telling me he should make us a handsome allowance for the first few years of our married life. You think I ought to take kindly to this sort of thing, I dare say, and drop quietly into my position of genteel pauperism, dependent upon my pencil, or my wife, for the dinner I eat and the coat I wear. No, Laura," cried the young man, passionately, "I don't take kindly to it; I can't stand it. The thought of my position enrages me against myself, against you, against everybody and everything in the world."

Launcelot Darrell talked thus to his betrothed while Richard and Eleanor were both in the room; the scene-painter sitting in a window making furtive sketches with a fat little stump of lead pencil upon the backs of divers letters.

Mrs. Monckton standing at another window looking out at the leafless trees, the black flowerless garden beds, the rain-drops hanging on the dingy firs and evergreens.

Mr. Darrell knew that he was overheard; but he had no wish that it should be otherwise. He did not care to keep his grievances a secret. The egotism of his nature exhibited itself in this. He gave himself the airs of a victim, and made a show of despising the benefits he was about to accept from his confiding betrothed. He in a manner proclaimed himself injured by the existence of his future wife's fortune; and he forced her to apologise to him for the prosperity which she was about to bestow upon him.

"As if it was being a pauper to take my money," cried Miss Mason, with great tenderness, albeit in rather obscure English; "as if I grudged you the horrid money, Launcelot. Why, I don't even know how much I'm to have. It may be fifty pounds a-year—that's what I've had to buy my dresses and things since I was fifteen—or it may be fifty thousand. I don't want to know how much it is. If it *is* fifty thousand a-year, you're welcome to it, Launcelot, darling."

"Launcelot darling" shrugged his shoulders with a peevish gesture which exhibited him as rather a discontented darling.

"You talk like a baby, Laura," he said contemptuously; "I suppose the 'handsome allowance' Mr. Monckton promises will be about two or three hundred a-year, or so; something that I'm to eke out by my industry. Heaven knows he has preached to me enough about the necessity of being industrious. One would think that an artist was a bricklayer or a stonemason, to hear him talk."

Eleanor turned away from the window as Launcelot Darrell said this; she could not suffer her husband to be undefended while she was by.

"I have no doubt, whatever Mr. Monckton said was right, Mr. Darrell," she exclaimed, lifting her head proudly, as if in defiance of any voice that should gainsay her husband's merits.

"No doubt, Mrs. Monckton; but there's a certain sledge-hammer-like way of propounding that which is right that isn't always pleasant. I don't want to be reminded that an artist's calling is a trade, and that when the Graces bless me with a happy thought, I must work like a slave until I've hammered it out upon canvas and sent it into the market for sale."

"Some people think the Graces are propitiated by hard labour," Richard Thornton said, quietly, without raising his eyes from his rapid pencil, "and that the happiest thoughts are apt to come when a man has his brush in his hand, rather than when he's lying on a sofa reading French novels; though I have known artists who preferred that method of waiting for inspiration. For my own part, I believe in the inspiration that grows out of patient labour."

"Yes," Mr. Darrell answered, with an air of lazy indifference—an air which plainly expressed that he disdained to discuss art-topics with a scene-painter, "I dare say you find it answer—in your line. You must splash over a good deal of canvas before you can produce a transformation-scene, I suppose?"

"Peter Paul Rubens got over a good deal of canvas," said Richard, "and Raffaelle Sanzio d'Urbino did something in that way, if we may judge by the cartoons and a few other trifles."

"Oh, of course, there were giants in those days. I don't aspire to rival any such Patagonians. I don't see why people should be compelled to walk through a picture gallery a mile long before they can pronounce an opinion upon

a painter's merits. I should be very well contented if my chance with posterity rested upon half-a-dozen pictures no bigger than Millais's 'Huguenots;' and as good."

"And I'm sure you could do dozens and dozens as good as that," cried Laura. "Why, it's only a lady tying a scarf round her lover's arm, and a lot of green leaves. Of course it's very pretty, you know, and one feels very much for her, poor thing, and one's afraid that he'll let those cruel Catholics kill him, and that she'll die broken-hearted. But you could paint lots of pictures like that, Launcelot, if you chose."

The young man did not condescend to notice his affianced wife's art-criticism. He relapsed into gloomy silence, and once more betook himself to that savage kind of consolation afforded by a sturdy exercise of the poker.

"But, Launcelot," pleaded Miss Mason, presently, "I'm sure you needn't be unhappy about my having money, and you're being poor. There's Mr. de Crespigny's fortune, you know; he can't be shameful and wicked enough to leave it to any one but you. My guardian said, only the other day, that he thought it would be left to you."

"Oh, ah, to be sure," muttered Mr. Darrell, moodily; "there's *that* chance, of course."

"He couldn't leave Woodlands to those two old maids, you know, Launcelot, could he?"

To the surprise of the two listeners, Richard Thornton and Eleanor, the young man burst into a harsh disdainful laugh.

"My respected maiden aunts!" he exclaimed; "poor devils, they've had a nice time of it."

Until this moment Richard and Eleanor had most firmly believed that the will which disinherited Launcelot Darrell bequeathed the Woodlands fortune to the two maiden sisters, Lavinia and Sarah de Crespigny; but the young man's disdainful laugh, and the contemptuous, yet half-pitying tone in which he spoke of the two sisters, plainly revealed that if he knew the secret of the disposal of Maurice de Crespigny's fortune, and knew that it was not left to himself, he knew also that equal disappointment and mortification awaited his aunts.

He had been in the habit of speaking of them with a savage though suppressed animosity. To-day his tone was utterly changed. He had a malicious pleasure, no doubt, in thinking of the disappointment in store for them; and he could

afford now to feel a kind of disdainful compassion for all their wasted labours, their useless patience.

But to whom, then, could the fortune be left?

Eleanor and Richard looked at each other in amazement. It might have been supposed that the old man had left his wealth to Eleanor herself, influenced by the caprice that had induced him to attach himself to her, because of her likeness to his dead friend. But this could not be, for the invalid had distinctly declared that he should leave nothing but George Vane's miniature to his new favourite; and Maurice de Crespigny was not a man to say one thing and mean another. He had spoken of a duty to be fulfilled, a duty which he was determined to perform.

Yet, to whom could he possibly owe any duty, except to his kindred? Had he any other relations except his three nieces and Launcelot Darrell? He might have other claims upon him. He might have some poor and modest kindred who had kept aloof from him and refrained from paying court to him, and whose forbearance he might choose to reward in an unlooked-for, unthought-of manner.

And again, he might have bequeathed his money to some charitable institution, or in trust

for some new scheme of philanthropy. Such a course would scarcely be strange in a lonely old man, who in his nearest relations might only recognise eager, expectant harpies keeping anxious watch for the welcome hour of his death.

Eleanor Monckton did not trouble herself much about this question. She believed from Launcelot Darrell's manner, that Richard Thornton had drawn the right inference from the meeting of the young man and the lawyer's clerk.

She believed implicitly that Launcelot Darrell's name was omitted from his great-uncle's last will, and that he knew it.

This belief inspired her with a new feeling. She could afford to be patient now. If Maurice de Crespigny should die suddenly, he would not die leaving his wealth to enrich the traitor who had cheated a helpless old man. Her only thought now must be to prevent Laura's marriage; and for this she must look to her husband, Gilbert Monckton.

"He will never let the girl whose destiny has been confided to him, marry a bad man," she thought; "I have only to tell him the story of my father's death, and to prove to him Launcelot Darrell's guilt."

The dinner went off very quietly. Mr. Monckton was reserved and silent, as it had lately become his habit to be. Launcelot Darrell had still the gloomy, discontented air that had made him a very unpleasant companion throughout that day. The young man was not a hypocrite, and had no power of concealing his feelings. He could tell any number of lies that might be necessary for his own convenience or safety; but he was not a hypocrite. Hypocrisy involves a great deal of trouble on the part of those who practise it: and is, moreover, the vice of a man who sets no little value upon the opinion of his fellow-creatures. Mr. Darrell was of a listless and lazy temperament, and nourished an utter abhorrence of all work, either physical or mental. On the other hand, he had so good an opinion of himself as to be tolerably indifferent to the opinions of others.

If he had been accused of a crime, he would have denied having committed it, for his own sake. But he never troubled himself to consider what other people might think of him; so long as their opinion had no power to affect his personal comfort or safety.

The cloth had been removed, for old fashions

held their ground at Tolldale Priory, where a dinner *à la Russe* would have been looked upon as an absurd institution, more like a child's feast of fruit and flowers, cakes and sugar-plums, than a substantial meal intended for sensible people. The cloth had been removed, and that dreary ceremonial, a good old English dessert, was in progress, when a servant brought Launcelot Darrell a card upon a salver, and presented it to him solemnly, amid the silence of the company.

The young man was sitting next Eleanor Monckton, and she saw that the card was of a highly glazed and slippery nature, and of an abnormal size, between the ordinary sizes of a gentleman's and a lady's card.

The blood rushed to Launcelot Darrell's forehead as he read the name upon the card, and Eleanor saw his under lip contract with a sudden movement, expressive of intense vexation.

"How did this—this gentleman come here?" he asked, turning to the servant.

"The gentleman has driven over from Hazlewood, sir. Hearing you were dining here, he came on to see you, he says; is he to be shown into the drawing-room?"

"Yes—no: I'll come out and see him. Will

you excuse me, Mr. Monckton: this is an old acquaintance of mine? Rather a pertinacious acquaintance, as you may perceive by his manner of following me up to-night."

Mr. Darrell rose, pushed aside his chair, and went out of the dining-room, followed by the servant.

The hall was brilliantly lighted, and in the few moments during which the servant slowly followed Launcelot Darrell, Eleanor had an opportunity of seeing the stranger who had come to the Priory.

He was standing under the light of the large gas-lamp, shaking the rain-drops from his hat, and with his face turned towards the dining-room door.

He was short and stout, smartly dressed, and foppish-looking even in his travelling costume; and he was no other than the talkative Frenchman who had persuaded George Vane to leave his daughter alone upon the Boulevard on the night of August 11th, 1853.

CHAPTER XX.

LAUNCELOT'S TROUBLES.

Eleanor Monckton sat looking at the door which had closed upon the scene in the lamp-lit hall, almost as if the intensity of her gaze could have pierced the solid oaken panel and revealed to her that which was taking place outside the dining-room.

Richard Thornton and her husband, both watching her face, marvelled at the sudden change in its expression,—the look of rapt wonder and amazement that had come over it from the moment in which Launcelot Darrell had gone out into the hall. Richard guessed that something strange and unexpected had occurred, but Gilbert Monckton, who was quite in the dark as to his wife's feelings, could only stare blankly at her face, and mutely wonder at the mystery which tortured him. Laura Mason,

who had been throughout the day alarmed by her lover's manner, was too anxious about Launcelot Darrell to observe the face of her friend.

"I'm sure there's something wrong," she said; "I'm sure there is, Mr. Monckton. You don't know how Launcelot's been going on all day, frightening me out of my wits. Hasn't he now, Eleanor? Hasn't he, Mr. Thornton? Saying he won't be a pauper, dependent upon his wife, and that you've wounded his feelings by talking about Art as if you were a bricklayer; or as if he was a bricklayer, I forget which. I had a presentiment all day that something was going to happen; and Launcelot did go on so, staring at the fire, and hammering the coals, and sighing as if he had something awful on his mind—as if he'd committed a crime, you know, and was brooding over it," added the young lady, with an evident relish of the last idea.

Mr. Monckton looked contemptuously at his ward. The girl's frivolous babble was in horrible discord with his own anxiety—a kind of parody of his own alarm.

"What do you mean by committing crimes, Laura?" he said. "I'm afraid you'll never learn

to talk like a reasonable being. Is there anything so very miraculous in the fact that some old acquaintance of Mr. Darrell's has come down to Berkshire to see him?"

Laura Mason breathed a sigh of relief.

"You don't think, then, that Launcelot has done something dreadful, and that this man has come to arrest him?" she asked. "It seems so odd his coming here on a dark winter's night; and Launcelot looked angry when he saw the card the servant gave him. I'm sure it's something dreadful. Let's go into the drawing-room, Eleanor. We shall have to pass through the hall, and if there's anything wrong we can find out all about it."

Eleanor started as Laura addressed her, and rose suddenly, aroused by the necessity of having to attend to something that had been said to her, but scarcely knowing what that something was.

"Eleanor!" exclaimed her husband, "how pale you are, and how strangely you look at that door. One would think that you were influenced by Laura's absurd fears."

"Oh, no! I'm not frightened of anything; only I—"

She paused, hesitating, and looking down in painful embarrassment.

"Only what?"

"I happened to see the person who has come to speak to Mr. Darrell, and—and—his face reminded me of a man I saw a long time ago."

Richard looked up quickly.

"But was there anything so very startling in the mere coincidence of a likeness?"

"Oh, no, nothing startling."

"Upon my word, Eleanor," exclaimed Gilbert Monckton, impatiently, "we seem to live in an atmosphere of mystery, which, to say the least of it, is far from agreeable to those who only occupy the position of lookers-on. There, there, go to the drawing-room with Laura. Mr. Thornton and I will follow you almost immediately. We shall have very little pleasure in sitting over our wine, with a consciousness that a kind of Gunpowder Plot is going on in the hall outside."

The lawyer filled his glass with claret, and pushed the crystal jug towards Richard; but he left the wine untasted before him, and he sat silently brooding over his suspicions, with a bent brow and rigidly compressed lips.

It was no use to struggle against his destiny, he thought. Life was to be always a dreary French novel, in which he was to play the victim husband. He had loved and trusted this girl. He had seen innocence and candour beaming in her face, and he had dared to believe in her; and from the very hour of her marriage a horrible transformation had taken place in this frank and fearless creature. A hundred changes of expression, all equally mysterious to him, had converted the face he loved into a wearisome and incomprehensible enigma, which it was the torment of his life to endeavour vainly and hopelessly to guess. Richard Thornton opened the door, and Eleanor gladly made her escape from the dining-room, holding Laura's hand in hers, and with the Signora following close behind her. The three women entered the hall in a group, and paused for a moment looking at Launcelot Darrell and the stranger.

Mr. Darrell stood near the open hall-door with his hands in his pockets, and his head bent in that sulky attitude which Eleanor had good reason to remember. The stranger, smoothing the wet nap of his hat with a careful hand, seemed to be talking in a tone of remonstrance,

and, as it were, urging something upon his companion. This was only to be guessed by the expression of his face, as the voice in which he spoke was scarcely above a whisper.

The three ladies crossed the hall and went into the drawing-room. Eleanor had no need to confirm her sudden recognition of the Frenchman by any second scrutiny of his face. She sat down near the broad hearth, and began to think how this man's unlooked-for coming might affect the fulfilment of her purpose. Would he be likely to thwart her? or could he not, perhaps, be induced to help her?

"I must talk to Richard," she thought. "He knows the world better than I do. I am almost as much a child as Laura."

While Mrs. Monckton sat looking absently at the fire, and trying to imagine how the advent of the Frenchman might he made subservient to the scheme of her life, Miss Mason burst into a torrent of panegyric upon the stranger's appearance.

"He's such a good-natured-looking dear," she exclaimed, "with curly hair and a moustache just like the Emperor's; and the idea of my frightening myself so about him, and thinking he was a

dreadful creature in a slouched hat, and with his coat collar turned up to hide his face, come to arrest Launcelot for some awful crime. I'm not a bit frightened now, and I hope Launcelot will bring him in to tea. The idea of his being a foreigner, too! I think foreigners are *so* interesting. Don't you, Nelly?"

Eleanor Monckton looked up at the sound of her name. She had not heard a word that Laura had said.

"What, dear?" she asked, listlessly.

"Don't you think foreigners interesting, Nelly?" repeated the young lady.

"Interesting? No."

"What; not Frenchmen?"

Mrs. Monckton gave a faint shiver.

"Frenchmen!" she said. "No, I don't like them, I—. How do I know, Laura? Baseness and treachery belong to no peculiar people, I suppose."

Mr. Monckton and the scene-painter came into the drawing-room at this moment, followed pretty closely by Launcelot Darrell.

"What have you done with your friend, Darrell?" Gilbert Monckton asked, with a look of surprise.

"Oh, he's gone," the young man answered indifferently.

"You've let him go, without asking him to rest, or take some refreshment?"

"Yes, I contrived to get rid of him."

"We don't usually 'contrive to get rid' of people when they come here on a wet winter night," said Mr. Monckton. "You'll give Tolldale Priory a reputation for inhospitality, I fear. Why didn't you ask your friend to stop?"

"Because I didn't care to introduce him to you," Launcelot Darrell answered coolly; "I never said he was a friend of mine. He's only an acquaintance, and a very intrusive acquaintance. He had no right to ferret out my whereabouts, and to come down here after me. A man doesn't want past associations forced upon him, however agreeable they may have been."

"And still less when those associations are disagreeable. I understand. But who is this man?"

"He's a Frenchman, a *commis voyageur*, or something of that kind; by no means a distinguished acquaintance. He's a good fellow, in his own particular fashion, and would go out of his way to do me a service, I dare say; but he's

rather too fond of absinthe, or brandy, or any other spirit he can get hold of."

"You mean that he is a drunkard," said Mr. Monckton.

"I don't say that. But I know that the poor devil has had more than one attack of delirium tremens in the course of his life. He's over here in the interests of a patent mustard, I believe, lately invented by some great Parisian gastronomer."

"Indeed; and where did you make his acquaintance?"

The same crimson hue that had mounted to Mr. Darrell's forehead when the Frenchman's card was handed to him, dyed his face now, and he hesitated for a few moments before replying to Gilbert Monckton's straight question. But he recovered himself pretty quickly, and answered with his accustomed carelessness of manner:

"Where did I know him? Oh, in London, of course. He was an inhabitant of that refuge for the destitute of all nations, some years ago, while I was sowing my wild oats there."

"Before you went to India?"

"Yes, of course before I went to India."

Mr. Monckton looked sharply at the young

man's face. There were moments when the lawyer's prudence, when the conscientious scruples of an honest man got the better of the husband's selfish fears; and in those moments Gilbert Monckton doubted whether he was doing his duty towards his ward in suffering her to marry Launcelot Darrell.

Was the young man worthy of the trust that was to be confided to him? Was he a fitting husband for an inexperienced and frivolous girl?

Mr. Monckton could only answer this question in one way. He could only satisfy his conscience by taking a cynical view of the matter.

"Launcelot Darrell is as good as other young men, I dare say," he argued. "He's good-looking, and conceited, and shallow, and idle; but the poor little girl has chosen to fall in love with him, and if I come between them, and forbid this marriage, and make the silly child unhappy by forcing my choice upon her, I may be quite as much mistaken as she, and after all marry her to a bad man. I may just as well let her draw her own number in the great lottery, and trust to Providence for its being a lucky one."

But to-night there was something in Launcelot

Darrell's manner which aroused a vague suspicion in the breast of the lawyer.

"Then your friend, the *commis voyageur*, has gone back to Windsor, I suppose?" he said.

"No; I couldn't very well avoid giving him shelter, as he chose to come, though he came uninvited. I sent him back to Hazlewood with a few lines addressed to my mother, who will do her best to make him comfortable, I dare say. Poor soul, she would scarcely refuse to shelter a stray dog, if the wandering cur were in any way attached to me."

"Yes, Mr. Darrell, you have reason to value your mother's affection," answered the lawyer, gravely. "But we must not forget that we've a good deal of business to transact to-night. Will you come with me into my study, as soon as you've finished that cup of tea?"

Launcelot Darrell bowed, and set down his teacup on the nearest table. Eleanor and Richard had both watched him closely since his coming into the drawing-room. It was easy to see that he had by no means recovered from the unpleasant surprise caused him by the Frenchman's visit. His careless manner was only assumed, and it was with evident difficulty that

he responded to each new demand made upon his attention.

He followed Gilbert Monckton slowly and silently from the room, without having lingered to speak so much as a word to Laura, without having even made her happy by so much as a look.

"He might have spoken to me," the young lady murmured, disconsolately, as she watched her lover's retreating figure.

Two hours elapsed before the gentlemen returned to the drawing-room; two dreary hours for Laura, who sat yawning over a book, or playing with her two dogs, which, by virtue of their high-breeding and good conduct, were constant occupants of the drawing-room at Tolldale. Richard Thornton and Mrs. Monckton played a game of chess, the strangest game, perhaps, that ever was played, for the moving backwards and forwards of the ivory pieces was a mere pretence, by means of which Eleanor contrived to take counsel with her faithful ally.

"Do you think this man's coming will help us, Dick?" she asked, when she had told the story of her recognition of the Frenchman.

Richard shook his head, not negatively, but reflectively.

"How can I tell?" he said; "the man may or may not be inclined to betray his friend. In any case it will be very difficult for us to get at him."

"Not for *you*, Richard," murmured Eleanor, persuasively.

"Not for *me*," echoed the young man. "Syren, mermaiden, witch of the sea, avaunt! It was you and the blue bonnet that settled for the shipbroker and his clerks. Have you the blue bonnet still, Nell; or have you any other influence in the millinery line that you can bring to bear upon this traveller in mustard?"

"But if he should remember me?"

"That's scarcely likely. His face was impressed upon your mind by the awful circumstance that followed your meeting with him. You have changed very much since you were fifteen years of age, Mrs. Monckton. You were a feminine hobbledehoy then. Now you are—never mind what. A superb Nemesis in crinoline, bent on deeds of darkness and horror. No, I do not see any reason to fear this man's recognition of you."

The expression of Launcelot Darrell's face

had subsided into a settled gloom when he reappeared in the drawing-room with Mr. Monckton.

The lawyer seated himself at a reading-table, and began to open the evening papers, which were sent from Windsor to Tolldale. Launcelot strolled over to Laura Mason, and, sitting down beside her, amused himself by pulling the silky ears of the Skye terrier.

"Do tell me everything, Launcelot," said Miss Mason. "You don't know how much I've suffered all this evening. I hope the interview was a pleasant one?"

"Oh, yes, remarkably pleasant," answered the young man, with a sneer. "I shall not be exposed to the reproach of having made a mercenary marriage, Laura, at any rate."

"What do you mean, Launcelot?" cried the young lady, staring aghast at her lover. "You don't mean that my guardian's been deceiving me all this time, and that I'm a poor penniless creature after all, and that I ought to have been a companion, or a nursery governess, or something of that kind, as Eleanor was before her marriage. You don't mean that, Launcelot!"

"Not precisely," answered Mr. Darrell; "but I mean that the noble allowance of which your

guardian has talked so much is to be two hundred a-year; which, as we are so unfortunate as to possess the habits of a gentleman and a lady, will not go very far."

"But ain't I rich,—ain't I an heiress?" cried Miss Mason. "Haven't I what-you-may-call-'ems—expectations?"

"Oh, yes. I believe there is some vague promise of future wealth held out as a compensation for all present deprivations. But really, although your guardian took great pains to explain the dry business details to me, I was almost too tired to listen to him; and certainly too stupid to understand very clearly what he meant. I believe there is some money which you are to have by-and-by, upon the death of somebody. But as it seems that the somebody is a person in the prime of life, who has the power of altering his will at any moment that he may take it into his head to do so, I look upon that expectation as rather a remote contingency. No, Laura, we must look our position straight in the face. A life of hard work lies before me; a life of poverty before you."

Miss Mason made a wry face. Her mind had little power to realise anything but extremes.

Her idea of poverty was something very horrible. An existence of beggary, with the chance of being called upon to do plain needlework for her daily bread, and with a workhouse at the end of the prospect.

"But I shall love you all the same, Launcelot," she whispered, "however poor we may be, and I'll wear dresses without any trimming, and imitation lace. I suppose *you* wouldn't know imitation lace from real Valenciennes, Launcelot, and it's so cheap. And I'll try and make pies and puddings, and I'll learn to be economical, and I've lots of jewellery that my guardian has given me, and we can sell that if you like. I'll work as hard as that poor woman in the poem, Launcelot, for your sake. 'Stitch, stitch, stitch, band and gusset and seam.' I don't mind the seams, dear; *they'd* be easy if one didn't prick one's fingers and make knots in one's thread; but I'm afraid I shall never be able to manage the gussets. Only promise me that you'll love me still, Launcelot. Tell me that you don't hate me because I'm poor."

The young man took the soft little hand that was laid with an imploring gesture on his wrist, and pressed it tenderly.

"I should be a brute if I wasn't grateful for your love, Laura," he said. "I didn't wish *you* to be rich. I'm not the sort of fellow who could contentedly accept a degraded position, and sponge upon a wife's fortune. I only wanted—I only wanted what I had been taught to expect," he muttered with a savage accent; "I'm set upon and hemmed in on every side, and I've a hundred mortifications and miseries to bear for want of money. But I'll try and make you a good husband, my dear."

"You will, Launcelot," cried the girl, melted by some touch of real earnestness in her lover's tone that was new and welcome to her. "How good it is of you to say that. But how should you be otherwise than good; and you will be a great painter, and all the world will admire you and talk about you, and we shall be so happy,—shan't we, Launcelot?—wandering through Italy together."

The young man answered her with a bitter laugh.

"Yes, Laura," he said, "the sooner we get to Italy the better. Heaven knows, I've no particular interest that need keep me in England, now."

CHAPTER XXI.

MR. MONCKTON BRINGS GLOOMY TIDINGS FROM WOODLANDS.

For some few days after the Frenchman's arrival, Launcelot Darrell stopped away from the Priory, much to the regret of his betrothed, whose delight in her *trousseau* was not sufficient to fill the blank made by her lover's absence. Miss Mason roamed disconsolately about the house, looking out at the bare trees, and the desolate garden walks, and quoted Tennyson until she became obnoxious to her fellow-creatures by reason of her regret that *he* did not come, and her anxiety that the day should be done, and other lamentations to the same effect.

She ran out of doors sometimes under the bleak February sky, with a cambric handkerchief over her head, as a sensible protection from the bitter atmosphere, and her light ringlets flying in the

wind, to stand at a little doorway in the high garden wall, and watch for her lover's coming by a narrow pathway through the wood, which it was his wont to make a short cut for himself in dry weather.

She was standing in this narrow doorway upon the afternoon of the 22nd of February—only twenty-one days before that eventful morning which was to make her Launcelot Darrell's wife —with Eleanor Monckton by her side. The short winter's day was closing in, and the shadows were thickening in the low woodland, whatever light might linger on the hill-tops above Tolldale. The two women were silent: Eleanor was in very low spirits, for on this day she had lost her friend and counsellor, Richard Thornton, who had had no alternative but to leave Tolldale, or to forfeit a very remunerative and advantageous engagement at one of the Edinburgh theatres, whither he had been summoned to paint the scenery for a grand Easter burlesque, about to be produced with unusual splendour, by a speculative Scottish manager; and who had, therefore, departed, taking his aunt with him. George Vane's daughter felt terribly helpless in the absence of this faithful ally. Richard had promised to

attend to her summons, and to return to Tolldale at any hour, if she should have need of his services, but he was separated from her by a long distance, and how could she tell when the moment of that need might come. She was alone, amongst people who had no sympathy with the purpose of her life, and she bitterly felt the desolation of her position.

It was no very great wonder, then, if she was thoughtful and silent, and by no means the joyous, light-hearted companion whom Laura Mason had loved and clung to at Hazlewood, before the coming of Launcelot Darrell. This young lady watched her now, furtively, almost fearfully, wondering at the change in her, and speculating as to the cause of it.

"She *must* have been in love with Launcelot," Laura thought; "how could she help being in love with him? And she married my guardian because he's rich, and now she's sorry for having done so. And she's unhappy because I'm going to be married to Launcelot. And, oh! suppose Launcelot should still be in love with her; like the hero of a dreadful French novel!"

The dusk was deepening in the wood, when two figures emerged from the narrow pathway. A

tall, slenderly-built young man, who switched the low brushwood and the fern with his light cane as he walked along, and a puffy little individual with a curly brimmed hat, who trotted briskly by his side.

Laura was not slow to recognise her lover even in that doubtful light, and Eleanor knew that the young man's companion was the French commercial traveller.

Mr. Darrell introduced his friend to the two ladies.

"Monsieur Victor Bourdon, Mrs. Monckton, Miss Mason," he muttered hastily; "I daresay you have thought me very neglectful, Laura," he added; "but I have been driving Monsieur Bourdon about the neighbourhood for the last day or two. He's a stranger in this part of the country, though he's almost as much an Englishman as I am."

Monsieur Bourdon laughed as he acknowledged the compliment with an air that was evidently intended to be fascinating.

"Y-a-a-se," he said, "we have been to Vindsor. It is very naice."

Launcelot Darrell frowned, and looked angrily at his companion.

"Yes, Bourdon wanted to have a look at the state apartments," he said; "he wanted to compare them with those interminable galleries at Versailles, I suppose, to the disparagement of our national glory."

"But the apartments are closed," said Eleanor.

"Oh! of course," answered Mr. Darrell, looking at her rather suspiciously, "they always are closed when you happen to want to see them. Just like everything else in this world of anomalies and paradoxes."

"He has taken his friend to Windsor," Eleanor thought; "had this visit any relation to his last visit? Did he go there to see Mr. Lawford's clerk?"

She was helpless without Richard, and could not answer this question.

"I'll write to him to-night," she thought, "and ask him to come back to me directly."

But in the next moment she was ashamed of herself for her selfishness. She might sacrifice her own life to her scheme of vengeance. The voice of her father crying to her from his unsanctified grave, seemed for ever urging her to do that; but she had no right to call upon others to make the same sacrifice.

"No," she thought, "wherever the road I have chosen may lead me, however difficult the path may be to follow, I will henceforward tread it alone. Poor Dick! I have tormented him long enough with my sorrows and my helplessness."

"You've come to dine, of course, Launcelot," Miss Mason said, while Eleanor stood motionless and silent in the doorway, absorbed in these thoughts, and looking like some pale statue in the dusk; "and you've brought your friend, Monsieur—Monsieur Bourdon to dine—"

"Ah, but no, mademoiselle," exclaimed the Frenchman, in a transport of humility. "I am not one of yours. Monsieur Darrell is so good as to call me his friend, but—"

The Frenchman murmured something of a deprecatory nature, to the effect that he was only a humble commercial traveller in the interests of a patent article that was very much appreciated by all the crowned heads of Europe, and which would doubtless, by the aid of his exertions and those of his compatriots, become, before long, a cosmopolitan necessity, and the source of a colossal fortune.

Eleanor shuddered and shrank away from the man with a gesture almost expressive of disgust,

as he turned to her in his voluble depreciation of himself and glorification of the merchandise which it was his duty to praise.

She remembered that it was this man, this loquacious vulgarian, who had been Launcelot Darrell's tool on the night of her father's death. This was the wretch who had stood behind George Vane's chair, and watched the old man's play, and telegraphed to his accomplice.

If she could have forgotten Launcelot Darrell's treachery, this presence would have been enough to remind her of that pitiless baseness, to inspire her with a tenfold disgust for that hideous cruelty. It seemed as if the Frenchman's coming had been designed by Providence to urge her to new energy, new determination.

"The man who could make this creature his accomplice in a plot against my father shall never inherit Maurice de Crespigny's fortune," she thought; "he shall never marry my husband's ward."

She linked her arm in Laura's as she thought this; as if by that simple and involuntary action she would have shielded her from Launcelot Darrell.

In the next moment a footstep—the firm tread

of a man—sounded on the crisp gravel of the garden walk behind the two girls, and presently Gilbert Monckton laid his hand lightly upon his wife's shoulder.

She was startled by his unexpected coming, and turning suddenly round, looked at him with a scared face; which was a new evidence against her in his troubled mind, a new testimony that she was keeping some secret from him.

He had left Tolldale Priory early that morning to give a day's attention to that business of which he had been lately so neglectful, and had returned a couple of hours before his usual time for coming home.

"What brings you out into the garden this bitter afternoon, Eleanor?" he said, sternly; "you'll catch cold in that thin shawl; and you, too, Laura; I should have thought a seat by the drawing-room fire far more comfortable than this dreary garden. Good evening, gentlemen; you had better bring your friend into the house, Mr. Darrell."

The young man muttered something of an apologetic nature, and Monsieur Victor Bourdon acknowledged the lawyer's cold salutation with an infinite number of bows and smirks.

"You have come home by an earlier train than usual, Gilbert," Mrs. Monckton said, by way of saying something that might break the silence which had followed her husband's coming; "we did not expect you until seven."

"I came to Windsor by the three o'clock express," answered Mr. Monckton. "I have not come straight home. I stopped at Woodlands to inquire after the invalid."

Eleanor looked up with a new and eager expression in her face.

"And Mr. de Crespigny—he is better, I hope."

"No, Eleanor, I fear that you will never see him again. The doctors scarcely hope that he will last out the week."

The girl set her lips firmly, and raised her head with a resolute gesture—a mute expression of determination and defiance.

"I *will* see him again," she thought; "I will not trust my hope of vengeance to a chance. He may have altered his will, perhaps. Come what may, I will stand beside his sick bed. I will tell him who I am, and call upon him, in my dead father's name, to do an act of justice."

Launcelot Darrell stood with his head bent and his eyes fixed upon the ground.

As it was the habit of Eleanor to lift her forehead with something of the air of a young war-horse who scents the breath of the battle-field afar, so it was this young man's manner to look moodily earthward under the influence of any violent agitation.

"So," he said, slowly, "the old man is dying?"

"Yes," answered Mr. Monckton; "your great-uncle is dying. You may be master of Woodlands, Launcelot, before many days are past."

The young man drew a long breath.

"Yes," he muttered; "I may: *I may.*"

CHAPTER XXII.

LAUNCELOT'S COUNSELLOR.

Mr. Darrell, and his friend the commercial traveller, did not linger long at the garden gate. There was nothing very cordial or conciliatory in Gilbert Monckton's manner, and he had evidently no wish to cultivate any intimate relations with Monsieur Victor Bourdon.

Nor was Launcelot Darrell by any means anxious that his companion should be invited to stop at Tolldale. He had brought the Frenchman to the Priory, but he had only done so because Monsieur Bourdon was one of those pertinacious gentlemen not easily to be shaken off by the victims who are so unfortunate as to have fallen into their power.

"Well," said the artist, as the two men walked away from the Priory in the murky dusk, "what do you think of her?"

"Of which *her? La belle future,* or the otha-i-r?"

"What do you think of Mrs. Monckton? I don't want your opinion of my future wife, thank you."

Monsieur Bourdon looked at his companion with a smile that was half a sneer.

"He is so proud, this dear Monsieur Lan—Darrell," he said. "You ask of me what I think of Mrs. Monck-a-tonne," he continued in English; "shall I tell you what I think without reserve?"

"Yes, of course."

'I think, then, that she is a woman of a thousand—in all that there is of resolute—in all that there is of impulsive—in all that there is of daring—a woman unapproachable, unsurpassable; beautiful to damn the angels! If in the little business that we came to talk about lately, this woman is to be in the way; I say to you, my friend, beware! If there is to be any contest between you and her, beware!"

"Pray don't go into heroics, Bourdon," answered Launcelot Darrell, with evident displeasure. Vanity was one of the artist's strongest vices; and he writhed at the notion of being

considered inferior to any one, above all, to a woman. "I knew Mrs. Monckton, and I knew that she was a clever high-spirited girl before to-day. I don't want you to tell me that. As to any contest between her and me, there's no chance of that arising. *She* doesn't stand in my way."

"And you refuse to tell to your devoted friend the name of the person who does stand in your way?" murmured Monsieur Bourdon, in his most insinuating tones.

"Because that information cannot be of the least consequence to my devoted friend," answered Launcelot Darrell, coolly. "If my devoted friend has helped me, he will expect to be paid for his help, I dare say."

"But, certainly!" cried the Frenchman, with an air of candour; "you will recompense me for my services if we are successful; and above all for the suggestion which first put into your head the idea—"

"The suggestion which prompted me to the commission of a—"

"Hush, my friend, even the trees in this wood may have ears."

"Yes, Bourdon," continued Launcelot, bitterly,

"I have good reason to thank you, and to reward you. From the hour in which we first met until now, you have contrived to do me some noble services."

Monsieur Bourdon laughed a dry, mocking laugh, which had something of the diabolically grotesque in its sound.

"Ah, what a noble creation of the poet's mind is Faust!" he exclaimed; "that excellent, that amiable hero; who would never, of his own will, do any harm; but who is always led into the commission of all manner of wickedness by Mephistopheles. And then, when this noble but unhappy man is steeped to the very lips in sin, he can turn upon that wicked counsellor and say, 'Demon, it is for your pleasure these crimes have been committed!' Of course he forgets, this impulsive Faust, that it was he, and not Mephistopheles, who was in love with poor Gretchen!"

"Don't be a fool, Bourdon," muttered the artist, impatiently. "You know what I mean. When I started in life I was too proud to commit a dishonourable action. It is you, and such as you, who have made me what I am."

"Bah!" exclaimed the Frenchman, snapping

his fingers with a gesture of unutterable contempt. "You ask me just now to spare you my heroics; I say the same thing now to you. Do not let us talk to each other like the personages of a drama at the Ambigu. It is your necessities that have made of you what you are, and that will keep you what you are, so long as they exist, and are strong enough to push you to disagreeable courses. Who says it is pleasant to go out of the straight line? Not I, faith of a gentleman, Monsieur Lance! Believe me, it is more pleasant, as well as more proper, to be virtuous than to be wicked. Give me an annuity of a few thousand francs, and I will be the most honourable of men. You are afraid of the work that lies before you, because it is difficult, because it is dangerous; but *not* because it is dishonourable. Let us speak frankly and call things by their right names. You want to inherit this old man's fortune."

"Yes," answered Launcelot Darrell. "I have been taught from my babyhood to expect it. I have a right to expect it."

"Precisely; and you don't want this other person, whose name you won't tell me, to get it."

"No."

"Very well, then. Do not let us have any further dispute about the matter. Do not abuse poor Mephistopheles because he has shown the desire to help you to gain your own ends; and has already by decision and promptitude of action achieved that which you would never have effected by yourself alone. Tell Mephistopheles to go about his business, and he will go. But he will not stay to be made a—what you call—an animal which is turn out into the wilderness with other people's sins upon his shoulders?—a scape-goat; or a paws'cat, which pull hot chestnuts from the fire, and burn her fingers in the interests of her friend. The chestnuts, in this case, this, are *very* hot, my friend; but I risk to burn my fingers with the shells in the hope to partake the inside of the nut."

"I never meant to make a scapegoat of you, nor a cat's-paw," said Launcelot Darrell, with some alarm in his tone. "I didn't mean to offend you, Bourdon. You're a very good fellow in your way, I know; and if your notions are a little loose upon some subjects, why, as you say, a man's necessities are apt to get the upper hand of his principles. If Maurice de Crespigny has

chosen to make an iniquitous will, for the mere gratification of an old madman's whim, the consequences of his injustice must rest on his head, not on mine."

"Most assuredly," cried the Frenchman, "that argument is not to be answered. Be happy, my friend, we will bring about a posthumous adjustment of the old man's errors. The wrong done by this deluded testator shall be repaired before his ashes are carried to their resting-place. Have no fear, my friend; all is prepared, as you know, and, let the time come when it may, we are ready to act."

Launcelot Darrell gave a long sigh, a fretful, discontented inspiration, that was expressive of utter weariness. This young man had in the course of his life committed many questionable and dishonourable actions; but he had always done such wrong as it were under protest, and with the air of a victim, who is innocently disposed, but too easily persuaded, and who reluctantly suffers himself to be led away by the counsels of evil-minded wretches.

So now he had the air of yielding to the subtle arguments of his friend, the agent for patent mustard.

The two men walked on in silence for some little time. They had left the wood long ago, and were in a broad lane that led towards Hazlewood. Launcelot Darrell strolled silently along, with his head bent and his black eyebrows contracted. His companion's manner had its usual dapper airiness; but every now and then the Frenchman's sharp greenish blue eyes glanced from the pathway before him to the gloomy face of the artist.

"There is one thing that I forgot, in speaking of Mrs. Monckton," Monsieur Bourdon said presently; "and that is that I fancy I have seen her somewhere before."

"Oh, I can account for that," Launcelot Darrell answered carelessly. "I was inclined to think the same thing myself when I first saw her. She is like George Vane's daughter."

"George Vane's daughter?"

"Yes, the girl we saw on the Boulevard upon the night—"

The young man stopped abruptly, and gave another of those fretful sighs by which he made a kind of sulky atonement for the errors of his life.

"I do not remember the daughter of George Vane," murmured the Frenchman, reflectively.

"I know that there was a young girl with that wearisome old Englishman—a handsome young person, with bright yellow hair and big eyes; an overgrown child who was not easily to be shaken off; but I remember no more. Nevertheless, I think I have seen this Mrs. Monckton before to-day."

"Because, I tell you, Eleanor Monckton is like that girl. I saw the likeness when I first came home, though I only caught one glimpse of the face of George Vane's daughter on the Boulevard that night. And, if I had not had reason for thinking otherwise, I should have been almost inclined to believe that the old schemer's daughter had come to Hazlewood to plot against my interests."

"I do not understand."

"You remember George Vane's talk about his friend's promise, and the fortune that he was to inherit?"

"Yes, perfectly. We used to laugh at the poor hopeful old man."

"You used to wonder why I took such an interest in the poor old fellow's talk. Heaven knows I never wished him ill, much less meant him any harm—"

"Except so far as getting hold of his money," murmured Monsieur Bourdon in an undertone.

The young man turned impatiently upon his companion.

"Why do you delight in raking up unpleasant memories?" he said in a half-savage, half-peevish tone. "George Vane was only one amongst many others."

"Most certainly! Amongst a great many others."

"And if I happened to play *écarté* better than most of the men we knew—"

"To say nothing of that pretty little trick with an extra king in the lining of your coat sleeve, which I taught you, my friend.—But about George Vane, about the friend of George Vane, about the promise—"

"George Vane's friend is my great-uncle, Maurice de Crespigny; and the promise was made when the two were young men at Oxford."

"And the promise was—"

"A romantic, boyish business, worthy of the Minerva Press. If either of the two friends died unmarried, he was to leave all his possessions to the other."

"Supposing the other to survive him. But

Monsieur de Crespigny cannot leave his money to the dead. George Vane is dead. You need no longer fear him."

"No, I have no reason to fear *him!*"

"But of whom, then, have you fear?"

Launcelot Darrell shook his head.

"Never you mind that, Bourdon," he said. "You're a very clever fellow, and a very good-natured fellow, when you please. But it's sometimes safest to keep one's own secrets. You know what we talked about yesterday. Unless I take your advice I'm a ruined man."

"But you will take it? Having gone so far, and taken so much trouble, and confided so much in strangers, you will surely not recede?" said Monsieur Bourdon, in his most insinuating tones.

"If my great-uncle is dying, the crisis has come, and I must decide one way or the other," answered Launcelot Darrell, slowly, in a thick voice that was strange to him. "I—I—can't face ruin, Bourdon. I think I *must* take your advice."

"I *knew* that you would take it, my friend," the commercial traveller returned, quietly.

The two men turned out of the lane and

climbed a rough stile leading into a meadow that lay between them and Hazlewood. The lights burned brightly in the lower windows of Mrs. Darrell's house, and the clock of the village church slowly struck six as Launcelot and his companion crossed the meadow.

A dark figure was dimly visible, standing at a low wicket-gate that opened from the meadow into the Hazlewood shrubbery.

"There's my mother," muttered Launcelot, "watching for me at the gate. 'She's heard the news, perhaps. Poor soul, if I didn't care about the fortune for my own sake, I should for hers. I think a disappointment would almost kill her."

Again a coward's argument,—a new loop-hole by means of which Launcelot Darrell tried to creep out of the responsibility of his own act, and to make another, in a manner, accountable for his sin.

END OF VOL. II.

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